

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

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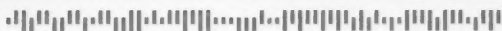
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# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

March/April 2011

"To assess the performance of journalism... to help stimulate continuing improvement in the profession, and to speak out for what is right, fair, and decent."

—from the founding editorial, 1961



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# Opening Shot



**A**l Jazeera, the pan-Arab satellite news network, showed global media how to cover a people's uprising—by getting right into the thick of things and keeping the cameras running, both witnessing and propelling events. Perched on a telephone booth in Cairo's Tahrir Square on January 31, the TV in the photo above was one of many positioned so that the crowds could keep tabs on Al Jazeera's nonstop coverage of the events, primarily the protest itself, that eventually toppled Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Al Jazeera's correspondents, like other foreign media, faced police harassment and worse as Mubarak's forces attempted, unsuccessfully, to shut down reports that were usurping state media propaganda. Watching Al Jazeera in the moments following Mubarak's resignation was riveting TV: the correspondents stepped aside and let the roar of the jubilant throngs tell the story. It's a pity that at press time no major US cable system was carrying Al Jazeera or Al Jazeera English's signal; most of us here can only watch their reports via online streaming. And there is reason to continue watching: its raw, straightforward reporting will continue to reverberate in Egypt and through other Arab countries. Stephen Franklin addresses the promise and the challenge faced by reporters in the region in his essay on page 17. **CJR**

**History channel** Egyptians demonstrating in Cairo's Tahrir Square watch Al Jazeera's coverage of their own demonstration on January 31, the seventh day of historic protests against the regime of Hosni Mubarak, now the former president.

## EDITORIAL



### Members Only

*Two cheers for high-cost subscription journalism*

Washington beckons as a land of opportunity for journalists today, at least in the realm of high-cost subscription news. We're cheering, but wary, too. A new unit of Bloomberg News is hiring 150 editorial staffers, essentially doubling the size of its DC bureau, to provide detailed coverage of federal legislation, regulation, and government spending. Politico has hired another forty or so journalists for its new "pro" brand, a high-priced news service that

will write fast and furiously about every major and minor happening in energy, health care, and technology policy and politics. *National Journal* last April offered buyouts to all of its hundred-plus editorial employees, but has been on a hiring spree since then to bring on nearly fifty new journalists. Meanwhile, CQ Roll Call, moving beyond the staff shakeout that followed the combination of the two Washington policy stalwarts in their September 2009 merger, is also launching new services and hiring fresh talent.

This is welcome news for job-starved journalists, especially those with wonk credentials. They get a chance to write, to become expert in complicated material, to hone survival instincts in a highly competitive arena, to receive guidance from veteran editors, and to score scoops that will be noticed by a hyper-wired Washington press corps.

Perhaps even more important for the news business, these new services could produce income streams to support addi-

tional serious reporting in the public interest, in more robust newsrooms.

Even though none of this new muscle was hired to write stories for the mainstream news consumer, hopefully those of us without the money or the interest in government minutiae to subscribe directly will still benefit from their work. Because of their narrowly cast beats, they should be able to penetrate the spin and hack down stories to essential facts, which will become the building blocks for other reporters (with due credit given to the publication that got the scoop, of course). Since the Washington bureaus of many regional publications have been decimated, some parts of government had begun to feel a little like ghost towns. But with all the new journalists scouring the halls of Congress, federal agencies, and K Street, there should be fewer places for politicians and policymakers to hide.

There are dangers lurking in the Washington job rush. These new hires will be trained to write for an elite audience with narrow, special interests. For example, the mandate for reporters and analysts working for Bloomberg Government is to quantify the impact of government actions on business and industry; they are writing for the C-suite at corporations, and access to their website costs \$5,700 a year per person. Politico, the masters at making political process a racy read for the voyeuristic masses, will focus its new talent on picking out the sexiest bits of the policy maw and serving them to well-heeled insiders for a minimum of \$2,495 a year.

When reporting so close to the ground, it's tough to resist cozying up to friendly leakers in an expense-account foxhole. Aggressive stories that investigate potential abuses of power by those special interests aren't likely to top many of these story lists. It's also difficult to manage cynicism; rarely will these journalists be asked to report out how policy proposals affect real people's lives. Without that contact "outside the Beltway," as they say, it's easy for a journalist to become a prisoner of its value system. That would be a shame for these reporters' careers and a loss for a public that needs to know how power works for and against the public interest.

Our hope is that these new hires will get the encouragement they need to write graceful prose from time to time. They should take pride in putting their scoops in context while also ferreting out details of complex proposals; understanding the meat of an issue makes one dangerous to sources who wish to obfuscate. And that's good journalism. **CJR**

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**The Storytellers**

Thanks for the excellent piece by Vanessa Gezari ("Crossfire in Kandahar," *CJR*, January/February). I wished the story would have continued as, to me, it ended too soon. The time Vanessa has spent with Afghanistan's wonderful storytellers has rubbed off on her in the best possible way. When thinking of Afghanistan, the book *The Wasted Vigil* comes to mind. That along with the fact that Vanessa Gezari and Patrick Cockburn are the two best information gatherers the Western press has in Afghanistan.

John Stanton  
Arlington, Virginia

**Gourevitch-CJR: An Exchange**

Re: "One Man's Rwanda: Philip Gourevitch softens some hard truths" by Tristan McConnell (*CJR*, January/February). *The full version of this response is online at [http://www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/philip\\_gourevitch\\_shoots\\_back.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/philip_gourevitch_shoots_back.php).*

So *CJR*, having produced a piece whose sole purpose is to discredit me and my work, attached a note to it, concurring in an apology to me by its author, Tristan McConnell. To me that translates into plain English as saying the reporter can't be trusted. Why? Because when McConnell interviewed me last September, he did not tell me it was for a piece about me. He said it was for something else—"about the changing media perception of Paul Kagame...how attitudes toward Kagame have changed over the years." McConnell represented the project the same way to the only other journalist he quotes who reported from Rwanda in the 1990s, Chris McGreal of *The Guardian*—and he used McGreal falsely in the piece, setting him up as if he were in opposition to me, and as if I disagree with what he says. Yes, I saw the killings of Hutus in the Congo by Rwandan army forces in 1996 and 1997 as a "worrying sign"—and yes, I believed, as most journalists who knew the situation in Eastern Congo firsthand at the time did, that the camps (and the mount-



Maybe I should  
thank *CJR* for  
recognizing  
my omnipotent  
domination of  
the media.

ing campaigns of terror that Hutu Power fighters from the camps were waging against Rwanda, and against Tutsis in the eastern Congo—a factor McConnell ignores) justified the invasion. The invasion, not the massacres. But McConnell never asked me about any of this. He never asked me about anything I've written, and never asked me to answer any criticisms. He pretends in the piece that I was "energetically" defending myself against accusations and then changing my mind, when I was, in fact, volunteering my longstanding approach to covering Kagame and Rwanda. No wonder the future of journalism is endlessly debated at journalism schools if this is how they do it at the best of them.

*CJR* calls itself a "watchdog and friend to the press," and yet *CJR* wants you to believe that pretty much the entire international press corps in Central Africa took dictation from me for the

past decade and a half. What a preposterous insult to so many journalists who risked their lives in the region. In reality, their work often inspired me.

Maybe I should really be thanking *CJR* and McConnell for recognizing my omnipotent domination of the media, and of the foreign policies of several great Western powers. After all, my subordination of all other points of view on Rwanda and the Congo wars to a facile fairy tale—that Paul Kagame is "benign," and that the story of post-genocide Rwanda is "beguiling"—has never before been fully appreciated.

Then I should thank also the former *New York Times*-man turned Columbia journalism professor, Howard French, who has labored for years to bestow the respectability of his credentials on the legend of my awesome reach as a Tutsi-loving, Jewish-influence peddler, and master player of the Holocaust card. French's writing about me reads like a template for *CJR*'s piece: agenda-driven, systematically dishonest in method and in substance. And now French has been appointed to *CJR*'s Board of Overseers, where he's charged with helping to guide the magazine's editorial strategy. What a shame that *CJR* didn't disclose this cozy relationship, which was established before the article appeared.

Now, *CJR*—on the defensive and after the fact—has invited me to respond. But what can you say about a piece that is such a porridge of innuendo and insinuation, misrepresentations and deliberate distortions—all of it conspicuously unsubstantiated? Of the critics McConnell quotes, the only one who makes a concrete accusation against me is Howard French with his insidious insistence, reprised almost verbatim from his book, that "one of the most important things Gourevitch did was to liken the Rwandan experience to the Israeli experience, to the Holocaust."

Analogies with the Holocaust and Israel and the Jews are not, in fact, an important part of my work—but it beats



me why French thinks that this is such a damning criticism. The crime of genocide was defined in response to the Holocaust, and the association is inescapable. Surely, French (who never, as far as I can tell, reported from Rwanda himself) is wrong to imply that imposing a taboo on comparisons to the Holocaust would strip the story of the Rwandan genocide of its emotional power. That he should be eager for that is bizarre and distasteful.

Comparisons of Rwanda's agony in 1994 to the Holocaust were ubiquitous in the American press long before I ever went there. The association was immediate, and it was not controversial. I didn't see the need for such an analogy to convey the Rwandan ordeal: the stories of Rwandans were sufficient. By contrast, toward the end of 1995, just before my first report from Rwanda appeared, the first major book on the genocide was published in America: *The Rwanda Crisis* by Gerard Prunier, a Frenchman. Prunier's book, which was immediately devoured by everyone who needed to know about Rwanda (Clinton policy makers, for sure), remains the history of the genocide you most often see cited in others' bibliographies—and it is rife with analogies between the Tutsis and the Jews, and between Israel and post-genocide Rwanda.

In his book, French fantasizes about how I manipulate American policy by tugging on Holocaust heartstrings in a passage that lambastes Clinton officials for enabling Laurent Kabila's Rwandan-backed campaign against Mobutu in

1996-97. French proclaims that the "most powerful factor at work" behind America's policy was the association of the Rwandan genocide with the Holocaust—and he blames me. Why? Because I wrote the sentence that McConnell also cites: "The analogy that's sometimes made between Rwanda's aggressive defense policy and that of Israel... is inexact but not unfounded." But here's the thing: that line appeared in a *New Yorker* article of mine in September 2000, three and a half years after the moment when French bogusly inserts it into his history and complains about its terrible influence—not to mention fully two years after my book was published, a book in which the word Israel appears exactly zero times.

In reviews of French's book, both Neal Ascherson, in *The New York Review of Books*, and Deborah Scroggins, in *The Nation*, seized on my line about Israel and accepted French's fabrication about its influence. Of course, it has been a long time since invoking Israel's militarization was a way of winning the political sympathies of readers of *The Nation* or *The New York Review of Books*. On the contrary, French was doing to me exactly what he was falsely accusing me of doing—exploiting political passions about Israel to harness American sympathies to an unrelated African conflict.

Although French is outraged to hear dead Jews and dead Tutsis mentioned in the same breath, he has no problem likening the killing of Hutus in Congo in 1997 to the Holocaust. On a trip to Kisan-gani that year, he writes of staring down

a road "that reportedly led to the killing fields" where Hutus were believed to be being put to death, and he declares that what lies at the end of that road is "a crude little Auschwitz."

With overseers like French, is it too much to ask that *CJR* also hire some fact-checkers? There is a great deal more to object to in McConnell's piece, but what matters for now is that by publishing it, and then proliferating it online after admitting that it is the product of journalistic malpractice, *CJR* has betrayed its own mission as the sort of honest broker of journalistic standards that we all need it to be.

Philip Gourevitch  
Brooklyn, NY

*Tristan McConnell responds:* My *CJR* article is no attempt to "discredit" Philip Gourevitch, nor is it a profile. There is scarcely more biographical detail here than you might find in one of his author's bios, nor do I make but the briefest passing reference to his years of research and reporting on many subjects beyond Rwanda.

Rather, it is an exploration of the debate over how Paul Kagame and his Rwanda are represented in the Western press, a debate approached through the frame of one of Rwanda's best known chroniclers—Gourevitch. It is precisely an article, "about the changing media perception of Paul Kagame... how attitudes toward Kagame have changed over the years."

I told Gourevitch it was not a profile but that he figured prominently in the piece. It was a discourtesy not to make explicit how focused on him the story was to be, and for that I have already apologized in private. For the rest, there is no apology to be made.

That the piece focuses on Gourevitch's work is a function of his position as the most high-profile journalistic voice on the subject in New York, where both this magazine and his main outlet, *The New Yorker*, are published. He may not like the public position, centrality to the Rwanda debate, or scrutiny of his work that his success brings, but it is his to bear.

Of course, journalists were not taking "dictation" from Gourevitch. Rather his writing captured an image of Kagame that existed at the time. He didn't cre-

## NOTES FROM OUR ONLINE READERS

IN OUR JANUARY 11 NEWS MEETING, WE ASKED OUR READERS, ARE THE KIND of errors that followed the shooting of Congresswoman Giffords preventable, or will they always be an unfortunate byproduct of our 24/7 media world?

I vividly remember working the city desk on the night Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. It was election night in Los Angeles and we had all been working since 7 a.m. I was just heading home, about 10 p.m., when the first news hit the radio. For the next twelve or so hours, I ripped updates and bulletins off the wire machines, watching as nearly everyone in California Democratic politics was reported as dead or bleeding, had called in as safe or was on the floor of the hotel kitchen having pounded the shooter, wrestled the shooter to the ground, or taken a bullet in the chest himself. I have copies of most of our rip-and-print editions of that night and early morning, and it will ever be clear to me that everyone was doing the best possible job under the circumstances. The battle is always between being as quick as the readers or listeners want versus pulling "real facts" from public officials whose jobs and futures were on the line. Slow down is the only real solution. —Terry McLafferty



ate or invent it; he just described it better than most, and in a magazine that carries more influence than most, and in a book (*We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*) that sold more copies than most.

The Rwanda narrative with Kagame at its heart captured by Gourevitch (and others) was powerful and so it held sway. But as that story has been assaulted by more recent events and revelations, this shift has not been reflected in his reported work.

I would point readers who want to draw their own conclusions to two of Gourevitch's *New Yorker* articles that bookend his Rwanda reporting thus far: "After The Genocide" (1995) and "The Life After" (2009). The latter is analyzed in some detail in my article and clearly illustrates my argument that Gourevitch's narrative does not reflect recent events and revelations.

---

## This article makes explicit what many discuss in private.

Contrary to Gourevitch's claims, "The Vanishing" (1997) contains plenty of kind words about Laurent Kabila, including the description of Congolese liberation hero Patrice Lumumba as his "mentor."

I know that Gourevitch has not written about Meles Zenawi (a basic search on the *New Yorker* website reveals this), but what I wrote is that, at the time, he fell for the then-popular concept of the "New African leadership" which included Zenawi.

Gourevitch's complaint that my piece wasn't sufficiently fact-checked is nothing more than rhetoric and wishful thinking. Nor is this article a lone voice; rather, it makes explicit what many discuss in private, surely one of the aims of worthwhile journalism.

I spoke to leading Africanist professors such as David Anderson at Oxford and Rene Lemarchand at Florida to explore the intriguing distance between media and academic views of Kagame

and his regime. For the same reason, I interviewed human-rights advocates and experts on Congo.

Although Chris McGreal of *The Guardian* was one of the only journalists whose quotes made the final edit, I interviewed others who had reported the Congo massacres at the time. The difference is that in Gourevitch's writing, there is something akin to an acceptance of these atrocities because of the weight of the earlier ones committed during the genocide.

Howard French was another interviewee and I would not presume to defend his position myself. He was not an "overseer" of any kind. My connection to *CJR* is simply as a commissioned writer and my connection to French was interviewer to interviewee.

I included his comments about the Holocaust because it was interesting that Lemarchand had made the same point.

The article is largely based on what Gourevitch has written about Rwanda. What was striking was how much more measured he was in talking when I asked him to respond to his critics, as reported at length in the article.

Clearly Gourevitch takes a critical assessment of his work very personally. But the thesis of the article is that there are varied views of Kagame, that they are shifting, that we as journalists should try to represent those changes as they occur, that none of this is monolithic, that there is a debate to be had.

This article and Gourevitch's response are a contribution to that wider, and I believe valuable, discussion.

*Howard French responds:* The best evidence, ironically, of Philip Gourevitch's outsized influence on the issue of Central Africa (or at least of his belief in it) comes in his unmeasured response to this very measured and at all times respectful criticism of his work. At this late date, it seems to come as a surprise to Gourevitch that informed people could disagree with him, except perhaps as the result of an unholy cabal.

On that subject, let me just say that I had never heard of Tristan McConnell when he called me to request an interview for his *CJR* article, whose preparation I had known nothing whatsoever about. Moreover, I initially resisted granting an interview because I have

never thought it useful to personalize the discussion of the fates of millions of people, and to encourage a me-versus-him debate might do just that.

On substantive matters, Gourevitch definitively lost me on Central Africa way back in October 1997, with a piece he wrote in *The New Yorker* titled "Stonewall Kabila." In it, he seemed to argue against holding the new, Rwanda-backed government of Laurent Kabila in Congo to account for recent large-scale massacres of Hutus in that country. "It's hard to imagine that anybody in the Congo stands to benefit from this test of wills," he wrote, speaking of the UN's efforts to pursue a doomed investigation into mass graves.

Tellingly, Gourevitch's bile in this piece is reserved for the UN and, by inference, for sticklers for human rights. One detects very little energy and no outrage whatsoever on the subject of the atrocities themselves. Congo's history, however, provides an eloquent and deeply tragic answer to Gourevitch's question of whether anyone stands to benefit from a test of wills over what might best be called impunity. With Gourevitch often providing rationales like those he marshaled in "Stonewall Kabila," the international community sided with continued impunity in the region, helping usher in a reign of bloodshed and mayhem in the Congo that by some estimates has cost that country over five million lives. As we know from recent reports from the United Nations and might well have known, or even prevented at the time, these included several tens of thousands of Hutus, including Congolese (not Rwandan) Hutu women, children, and the elderly, who were systematically exterminated by Rwandan forces or their surrogates simply because they were Hutu.

*The editors respond:* We agree that when an article is to focus on somebody's work, as this one was from the start, that person should be told that fact up front. We are sorry that our writer didn't make his focus clear in this case. Beyond that, we understand that Gourevitch may not like the judgments and conclusions in "One Man's Rwanda," but it was thoroughly reported and meticulously fact-checked. As for Gourevitch's assertion that Howard French's "work reads like a template

for CJR's piece about me," and his suggestion that French, a member of our Board of Overseers, steered the piece: not true. The board did not exist when this piece was assigned and reported, nor did the editors know who would be on the board until the bulk of the editing was complete, nor did French have any bearing whatsoever on the direction of the piece beyond McConnell's interview with him, one of many interviews. Finally, Gourevitch's assertion that we invited him to respond because CJR is "on the defensive" is false. Any subject of any story in CJR is invited to respond anytime.

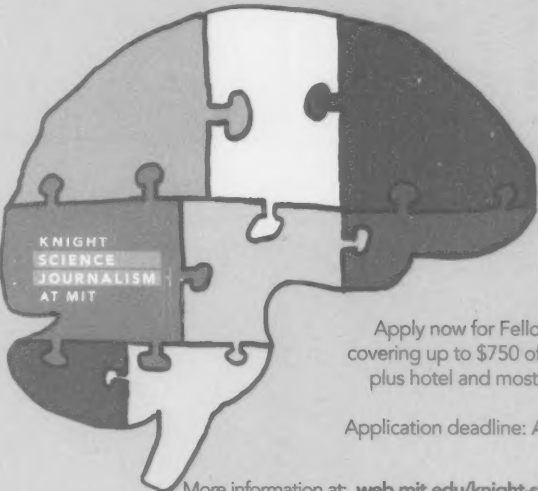
#### Some Rumor

David Glenn's otherwise fine portrait of Carol Rosenberg ("The Record Keeper," CJR, November/December 2010) is marred by its peripheral smearing of my *Harper's* article on the June 2006 deaths of three Guantánamo prisoners. Glenn quotes Charles Swift, a former military detainee defense lawyer, speaking of "all kinds of crazy rumors" and then flags my article, which rests not on "crazy rumors," but on on-the-record statements by four guards on duty that evening, a prominent forensic pathologist's review, and research by a team at Seton Hall Law School, which meticulously reviewed FOIAed records of the government's inquiry. My article does not purport to solve the question of the deaths; rather, it shows that the government's claims don't hold up. Specifically, eyewitness testimony by the sergeant of the guard puts the site of the deaths not in the cellblock of Swift's client, but in another installation. What happened remains unclear. The suggestion of death associated with interrogation is only conjecture designed to show that hypotheses other than suicide can be sustained on the same facts, and not a conclusion.

Scott Horton

Contributing editor, *Harper's Magazine*  
New York, NY

*The editors respond:* The phrase "crazy rumors" was Swift's assessment of the theory the prisoners had not committed suicide, not our author's. Our article originally said Horton's piece suggested the prisoners had been killed by their guards. It did not say that. The text has been corrected online. **CJR**



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# Currents



## The Hacker, Off the Couch

*Back in May 2007, Brian Boyer was just another computer guy short-circuiting from ennui sitting on a friend's couch, reading blogs. Then he noticed a post on BoingBoing about Northwestern University's Medill School, which had just announced big scholarships specifically for computer programmers interested in a master's degree in journalism. ¶ As any good techie would, Boyer Googled "journalism" to learn more about the practice and beliefs of the profession that was courting people just like him.*

He was invigorated by what he found: ennobling definitions that described journalism as a way to inform people and help them better self-govern. By January 2008, he was an inaugural member of the program, which was funded by a Knight News Challenge grant and designed to train people who write code to write ledes. The idea: to re-boot the industry's online presence, which has suffered

from lack of talent (and imagination) in producing user-friendly databases and interactive news applications. As Boyer says: "Journalism needs more nerds."

Since mid-2009, thirty-three-year-old Boyer has been the news application editor at the *Chicago Tribune*, where he leads a team of five tasked with helping the paper achieve new levels of computer-assisted reporting and reader interactivity. It's a couch-to-newsroom story of growing frequency in the digital news world.

Boyer has anointed his kind "hacker-journalists," "hacker" being akin to an ace among programmers. They're guided by a dogooder mentality and an open-source ethos—believing that information, from programming code to government documents, should be free to all. Like-minded groups dot the country and there are frequent meetups of journos and techies. Some, called "hackathons," include competitions, such as last year's challenge to report out and then code apps to help New Yorkers get critical urban info (like the best time to catch a cab), while building community spirit.

One such group, called Hacks/Hackers, was co-founded by Boyer's mentor at Medill, professor of digital innovation Rich Gordon. Gordon tried for years to turn journalists into programmers before reversing his idea and dreaming up the scholarship that pulled

**'New media is like oxygen. Get used to it. I think that there is no more steering wheel in the hand of *The Washington Post*. I used to live in mortal fear about what you would write. Now, I don't care.'** —Ted Leonsis, owner of the NHL's Washington Capitals and the NBA's Washington Wizards, speaking at a Post-sponsored conference

in Boyer, and, to date, eight others. "I think it's been extremely successful," he says of the marriage of computer science and journalism. Elsewhere, for instance, Columbia University began offering a joint master's in journalism and computer science this year. "It's not a radical concept anymore."

So far, Boyer's team has built online programs to help families find the headstones of loved ones after cemetery caretakers double-sold plots, as well as an application to help parents compare schools. During a *Tribune* investigation into the problems created by a state policy of housing non-senior felons in nursing homes, Boyer saw reporters struggling to read thousands of government documents—they were considering narrowing the scope from statewide to just the Chicago area. So Boyer wrote a program that downloaded the documents from the web, exported the text, and searched for key words. In a few hours, he searched 44,000 documents and presented the investigative team with the 3,600 relevant to their research. His team then built an unprecedented database for the *Tribune* website that allows readers to search for any nursing home in the state to see its record of reported crimes, violations, and the number of resident sex offenders and felons.

Boyer calls it the most important work of his career, which before journalism was mostly programming to help

marketing teams and law firms buried in paperwork. "I feel like the only way we should be judging stuff is by impact," Boyer says. "Is this work making the world a better place?" So far, so good. The investigation spurred sweeping reform to reduce nursing home violence, signed into law by Governor Pat Quinn in July. Among other things, it mandates that state government create its own version of the database. On his blog, Boyer crowed, "Better software is about to become Illinois law." It's what can happen when a self-described nerd and a crusading journalist collide.

—Bret J. Schulte

## Hungarian Chill

HUNGARY'S CONSERVATIVE government stirred international outrage when tough media regulations went into effect January 1, the same day the country assumed the presidency of the Council of the European Union. The laws transferred all assets of public service media—three television stations, three radio stations, and one national news service—to a state fund, installed new directors appointed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party to run them, imposed the same content regulations on

all media, outlined fines for violating the regulations, and gave a new National Media and Infocommunications Authority power to shut outlets down. In December, Amy Brouillette spoke to Éva Simon of the Budapest-based Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (TASZ), which has petitioned the country's top court to strike provisions of the legislation it argues violate Hungary's constitutional guarantee of free press, European laws, and clash with basic principles of free media. A longer version of this interview is at [http://www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/hungarian\\_chill.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/hungarian_chill.php).

### What parts of the law are TASZ challenging?

The content regulations and specifically the obligations



that the media inform the public of events important to the "Hungarian nation," and offer "balanced news"

## HARD NUMBERS

**14** percent of coverage given to former press secretary Scott McClellan and his book, *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception*, the week of its 2007 release

**1.4** percent of coverage given to George W. Bush's memoir, *Decision Points*, the week of its 2010 release. The book contained no mention of McClellan.

**£34** million (about \$55 million) will be cut from BBC Online's budget of £137 in response to a freeze in license fees by the Cameron government

**200** BBC websites—and 360 jobs—are set to be eliminated in the next two years under the plan

**70** percent drop in newspaper coverage of HIV/AIDS in developed countries over the past two decades

**100,000+** copies of Wired's first iPad issue (June 2010) were purchased at \$4.99 each

**32,000** copies of Wired's September iPad issue were purchased at \$3.99 each, leaving many talking of a "slide" in magazine sales for the device

**37** percent of Wired's September newsstand sales were for the iPad, even with the decline

**135** instances in which *The New York Times* has misspelled JFK advisor Theodore Sorensen's name

**66** instances in which *The New York Times* has spelled Jackson Pollock as "Jackson Pollack"

Sources: Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, C-SPAN, BBC, *The Trends in Sustainability Project*, Los Angeles Times Jacket Copy blog, Advertising Age, Regret The Error.



that serves the “public interest,” does not infringe on “public morality,” violate “public order,” or offend the “minority,” the “majority,” or “church or religious groups.” No one has any idea what any of this means or how authorities will interpret it. It seems this would discourage or even eliminate critical journalism. We’re also challenging new rules on source protection. Journalists must reveal their sources if they report anything relating to vaguely defined issues of crime prevention, public order, or national security, at the demand of the newly created media authority and without a court order. This essentially eliminates investigative journalism in Hungary.

#### **Are the provisions unconstitutional?**

There are already provisions in the criminal code that regulate media content—hate speech, for instance. There are also provisions dealing with defamation and breaches of privacy. From the constitutional law per-

spective, these new regulations put an undue burden on the press and violate freedom of expression rights guaranteed by Article 61 of the constitution.

#### **Does the law regulate blogs as well as traditional media?**

Yes, the law extends to online news portals that “inform, entertain, or educate,” have any kind of advertising content, and have an editor. A blog with a Google ad falls under the new definition of the “press.”

#### **Fidesz says the legislation is in line with democratic media standards and other EU states. Is this true?**

No. The new law is a patchwork of the worst practices in the EU, with extra limits on freedom of the press. It is based on how media worked fifty years ago in Hungary, when there were few media sources. The public no longer relies on a single media source, where if the news were not “balanced” they would be misinformed or misled.

There are some serious

problems with free press issues within the EU and other Western democracies. Think about the US Decency Act or the French model, which is totally opposed to net neutrality. Still, there is no precedent within the EU for a single, government-appointed authority with powers to regulate content of all types of media, or to impose fines to Internet, broadcast, and print outlets, and to suspend or shut them down for not paying.

#### **The EU has come under pressure to act. What power does it have?**

When an EU member state puts limits on freedom of expression in ways that clash with EU minimum standard regulations, this can be brought to the European Commission. The EU can also put political pressure on a member state, which is what’s going on now. You can turn to the European Court of Human Rights, the court of the Council of Europe, if there is a case—for instance, if a blogger is fined under the

new media law for violating the content regulations, and the case goes through all levels of the Hungarian courts. They can rule that the decision violates Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression.

#### **Isn’t Hungary bound to comply with EU media standards?**

The European Commission can examine whether the law is in line with the EU’s Audiovisual Media Services Directive, which regulates television and on-demand services, and the Electronic Commerce Directive, which regulates ISPs and liability issues, and some competition directives. If the law clashes with an EU directive, they can examine and oblige the member state to modify the law. Basic rights are also protected by Article 11 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression and the press.

#### **The government plans to submit a new constitution, which many worry could further weaken the Constitutional Court and Hungary’s balance-of-powers system. What will happen then?**

We have no idea. We have been criticizing the constitution re-writing process, as we believe the current constitution ensures the proper functioning democratic system based on respect for human rights and the rule of law for the first time in Hungary’s modern history. My hope is that the court would consider the petition before the new constitution is passed and that it would rule, as it historically has, for freedom of expression. **CJR**

## **LANGUAGE CORNER MENTEE FRESH**

Write LanguageCorner@cjr.org

WHEN YOU HAVE A “MENTOR,” WHAT ARE YOU (ASIDE FROM IN NEED OF ADVICE)? Before the sixties, you probably would have been called a “protégé,” or “protégée” if you were female. But today, you’re more likely to be called a “mentee,” regardless of your sex.

The word “mentee” is not in most dictionaries, and some usage authorities decry it as an unnecessary, and less elegant, replacement for “protégé.” Tough. It’s here to stay.

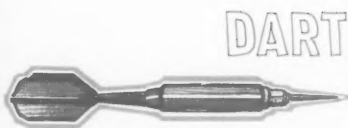
The *Oxford English Dictionary* calls “mentee” an American word, and traces its first usage to 1965. But “mentee” had been used for many years before that, primarily in academic publications.

In 1916, for example, a report by a Dartmouth professor said that the University of Michigan’s School of Engineering had a system: “Each instructor (called a ‘mentor’) has ten students (called ‘mentees’) and retains the same ones throughout the course.” “Mentee” appeared occasionally for the next fifty years until it caught fire, though even then not without controversy: in 1944, a report in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* discussed a system to pair candidates with more experienced architects. “One of our group even wanted to describe the candidate as a mentee!” the article exclaimed incredulously.

A “protégé” by any other name may not smell as sweet, but please don’t call yourself a “manatee” (as has been done), gentle beast though it is.

—Merrill Perlman





**DART** The importance of a daily newspaper's role in local politics is undeniable. Ideally, it reports the issues impartially, then makes

informed endorsements on its editorial page. Media companies should also be upstanding members of their communities and lend their resources to good causes. But what happens when these roles and responsibilities come into conflict? What happens when a donation to a cause, paired with a strong editorial position, blurs an important line between the business office and the editorial page? Those questions are at the center of this issue's **DART**.

Last November, voters in Portland, Maine, amended the city charter to establish a popularly elected mayor. Previously, the nine-member city council had authority over policy and budget decisions, and chose a largely ceremonial, part-time mayor each year. Advocates of the change said it would bring stronger leadership and increased accountability. Opponents said the existing structure worked best and saved money.

There's no doubt that readers of the largest newspaper in Maine, the *Portland Press Herald*, knew which side the paper took. "Portland voters should say 'yes' to providing leadership that the city has lacked," read an unsigned October 18 editorial.

If the paper's support did not surprise, something else might have: a series of full-page ads that appeared in the *Press Herald* every day for a week before the election. Small-type disclosures at the bottom of some ads indicated they were paid for by the PAC backing the amendment; others gave the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce credit.

In fact, though, no one had paid for the ads; they were a gift from the newspaper to the Chamber. That was revealed on December 14, when, in accordance with Maine campaign finance law, the PAC, "Elect our Mayor, YES on 1!" filed a report listing the cash and in-kind contributions it had received. One entry: a donation from the Chamber of \$46,507.74 worth of ads in the *Press Herald*. "Note: The Portland Press Herald did not charge the Portland Regional Chamber for the ad space," the committee's treasurer wrote.

The vote on November 2 was close: about 13,000 voting yes on the referendum, about 12,000 voting no. City council member Cheryl Leeman, who opposed the referendum, believes the paper knowingly donated the space to back the measure, and that the ads tipped the balance of the vote.

"Never, ever on a local issue, where you have a local newspaper that editorializes on an issue, have you seen them back it financially," she said. "It's a credibility and an integrity issue, for both the Chamber and the paper."

Randy Billings broke the story in *The Forecaster*, another

Maine paper. He interviewed Godfrey Wood, the Chamber's CEO, who told him there was an existing agreement with the paper for a free weekly quarter-page advertisement. "Wood said the chamber requested additional advertising space to promote the elected mayor position and the paper agreed," Billings wrote.

Wood declined to comment further to CJR. In a letter to the Maine Ethics Commission, which investigated whether the *Press Herald's* donation violated campaign finance law, Wood reiterated that Richard L. Connor, the paper's publisher, editor, and part owner, knew the purpose of the additional ad space.

Connor asked executive editor Scott Wasser to speak for his paper. Wasser told CJR that he considered complaints from the losing side to be "sour grapes." Despite the dramatic increase in—and timing of—the free ads, Wasser insists the paper gave the space to the Chamber with the assumption that they would use it to promote the local economy.

"We give away a ton of ad space to all kinds of civic and public organizations and nonprofits," Wasser said. "We don't ask them what they're going to do with it, and we don't tell them what to do with it."

Wasser said management was discussing a requirement that, in the future, donated ad space not be used for political purposes. But he does not think the *Press Herald* did anything wrong. "We donate space in print newspapers, which is protected by freedom of speech," he said. "If there was any wrongdoing, it was by the Chamber, who used the space inappropriately."

Greg Kesich, who backed the referendum as one of the paper's editorial writers and in his signed column, said that he was unaware of the ad donation until it became a matter of public controversy. While companies have a right to use their resources in public affairs, he said, "what's unusual is that this is a news organization, and this seems to be a break with the practice that I'm used to." He paused. "And I think there are good reasons for the traditional practice."

Tom Bell, a political reporter at the *Press Herald* who leads the paper's union, thinks management donated the space to win favor with the local business community, not because it felt strongly about the vote.

"Nevertheless, I think it's easy to forget that the Chamber is a political organization," he said. And a political organization that receives free ads necessarily has an enormous advantage over those that don't. More importantly, he worries the paper's lack of disclosure about the donation may challenge readers' faith in the newsroom's impartiality.

"This makes our jobs, as journalists, harder," said Bell. "We understand that our credibility is our bread and butter, so we're very protective of it." **CJR**

## Mark Cuban's Business Model

*A media maverick on the news industry*

MARK CUBAN IS WELL KNOWN AS THE BRASH, COMBATIVE OWNER OF THE DALLAS Mavericks professional basketball team, the guy who looks like a big kid and sometimes acts like one. His outbursts can obscure his most notable attribute—he is an astute businessman.

Cuban made his fortune building and selling two businesses—the first a computer-services company and the second an Internet streaming-media firm named broadcast.com. It was the media company that made him wealthy, and he has remained engaged in media since selling it to Yahoo more than a decade ago.

He's an entrepreneur, first, and maybe last, and not by any stretch a journalist, but Cuban is the majority-owner of a cable channel, HDNet, whose regular lineup features a Dan Rather investigative series; two websites whose sole tasks are to ferret out corporate and government malfeasance ([sharesleuth.com](http://sharesleuth.com) and [bailoutsleuth.com](http://bailoutsleuth.com)); and HDNet Films, the movie production company behind the prize-winning documentary, *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*.

Cuban is media-savvy. He tweets (@mcuban); he blogs (at <http://blogmaverick.com>); he dances with the stars. He writes and talks about broad themes in digital media and is especially interested in what is the most pressing issue facing the contemporary news media—how to monetize its prodigious output. Put more simply: Can the news make money?

CJR Encore Fellow Terry McDermott engaged in an extended e-mail correspondence with Cuban, who answered questions on his Android-enabled telephone. Here's an edited transcript of that conversation.

**What is the future of journalism, assuming it has one? How can journalism monetize the web? I pay \$9 a month for Netflix. Why won't I pay the same for good journalism?**

The future of journalism will be tethered to the future of profitability of the news business. If there are ways to create profits using news created by journalists, as opposed to partisan shouting, then it will prosper. The good news is that there are many upcoming opportunities for news organizations. One will be subscription models on portable devices. If iTunes offers subscriptions, it might—and the key word is “might”—create a new future for journalism. Another option might be a Netflix for news.

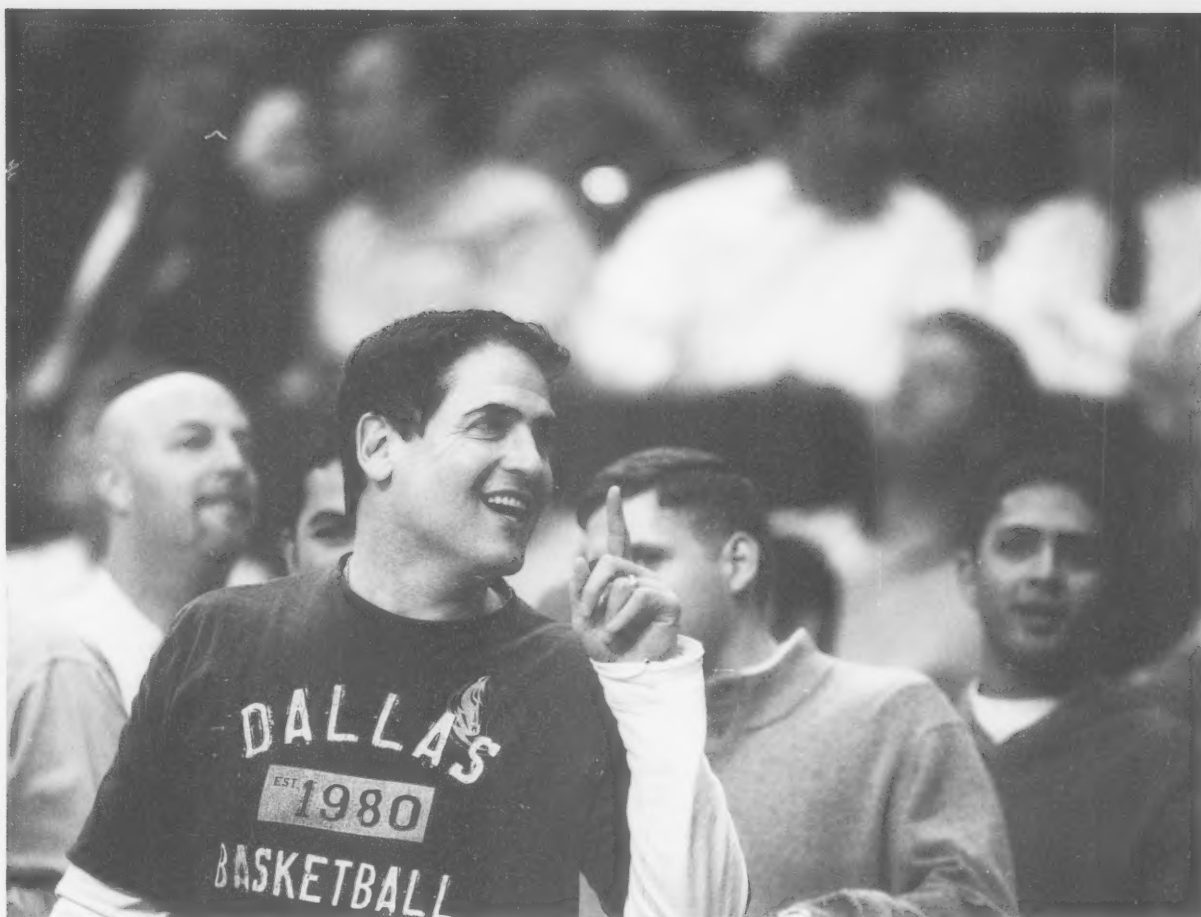
At its heart, Netflix is an arbitrage-based business. Netflix pays up front for content against an amount per viewing. They then sell subscriptions to the content. It's not inconceivable that someone could do the same thing with news. Go

to the big newspapers and offer them an amount that is equal to their net margins for their online businesses (online revenues minus costs) in exchange for the right to exclusively present the content to its subscribers. It would leave the right to newspapers to offer the same content behind a paywall, but not for free. It then could go offer a subscription with a monthly fee to the service.

So, for \$7.95 per month, I would go to this site and get all the news I wanted for no additional charge. The service would learn from usage and pay more for the most-read content, less for less-read (knowing that some content providers may withdraw if the amount is not high enough). The real challenge would be in selling enough subscriptions. Do you need 1 million, 10 million? Is \$7.95 too high or too low? I don't know, but it's a business someone—not me—should explore. Or possibly it is one that the major paper ownership groups should consider creating.

**What would you do if you woke up tomorrow and found someone had made you CEO of Tribune Company? I mean, what would you do once you stopped crying?**

I don't think I would cry at all. I don't know their expense levels, but they certainly have enough content to leverage and quite a few monetization opportunities.



**Shot clock** Mark Cuban, pictured at a 2008 Mavericks game, says it's not too late to demand payment for online content.

**Assuming you own Tribune Company: you could be both the content creator and the Netflix analog, correct?**

The role would be of aggregator and sales organization. I don't know if Tribune has the skill set to acquire and market a subscription product, but they can probably partner with someone who can. The former Netflix CFO is out there.

**Would the subscriptions be broken into channels—for example, foreign news, tech, sports?**

Hell no. The idea is to create as much value as possible for the subscription so that people see it as the best way to consume news.

**Do you think there will come a day soon when you won't want a physical newspaper? Could newspapers just give all**

**their subscribers a Kindle or iPad and lose the trucks and the trees?**

I don't see that day coming until costs force the issue or there is a new technology that creates a new and compelling reading experience. The current e-book readers are not it.

On a separate note, not to pile on papers, but they are getting hammered on the head once again by Groupon and Google.

Next to the Yellow Pages, newspapers and local television dominated the local ad sales force forever. It has always been a core competency. The minute they saw Groupon salespeople in their accounts, they should have immediately put together a comparable product. The same for Google local ads selling for \$25 per month.

Both companies are spending a shit-

load of money on creating or dramatically expanding local sales forces. It's not too late for companies like Tribune to attack both businesses, but the clock is about to strike midnight.

**Do you see a viable financial strategy for legacy media to add new products? Something like searchable archives of public records?**

Everything they touch should be made available in a searchable manner. Data will always have value and that value increases as the amount of data increases.

"Touch once, available to all," should be an immutable mantra to all. Add it behind a subscription wall and you increase its value and give people a reason to subscribe. They would be stupid to offer it as a stand-alone product.

**What do you think the journalism landscape will be like in twenty years? Will you still have a hometown paper? What is the feasibility of more journalism start-ups?**

No idea. No reason to even guess. Twenty years is forever. And again, putting any one data type as a separate business unit is pretty stupid. Customers buy digital data in as big of chunks as they can for as little money as they can. They want to know they are getting great value even if they never touch 99 percent of it. Just like Netflix.

No one complains about Netflix, saying, "Ten bucks a month? Why am I paying for 19,900 movies and TV shows I will never watch?" They think \$10 is reasonable if they get access to more video than they will ever watch. So they subscribe because it's a unique value proposition.

News enthusiasts and others would look at \$7.95 for the best news content if it was an exclusive source and there was a far higher perceived value.

**What do you think of the monetization proposals that would somehow meter usage? Is that feasible?**

Not a fan. It makes people calculate value and that's a hassle that will hurt sales.

**On the success of Groupon, et al.: you're absolutely right that old media ad sales staffs have fallen behind the curve.**

Not what I said. Sales people can only sell what they have. The fault was on the part of management for not recognizing what was going on.

**In many respects, the free fall of legacy media has been a revenue problem. Old media has more readers and viewers than ever. For whatever reason, advertisers have not followed them to the web. Why?**

Not true. Advertisers have stayed with television and can't get enough web video. Newspapers are doing a decent job of monetizing the net. It's just that the Internet-only solutions for classifieds destroyed that business, and free Internet news hit subscriptions and, therefore, ad revenue. Those losses, combined with very high legacy costs and huge debt, turned the business up-

side down. Had there been no debt, the newspaper business would have had the resources to respond.

Realize that the Internet companies made the same kind of mistakes. When the bubble burst and cash flow and capital disappeared, what did the Internet companies do? They folded or they cut to the bone and killed much of their future. That opened the door for new competitors.

That's why Google was able to come in and take over search. Yahoo and others stopped investing. Heck, Yahoo sold a perpetual license to Pay-Per-Click for not much more than \$28 million. That's how desperate they were. Think if they had sold a license to Google on an annual basis. The entire Internet landscape would be completely different. Yahoo refused to spend money to keep broadcast.com alive even though it was breaking even. Their stock price was freaking them out. There would be no YouTube had they continued to support broadcast.com.

Yahoo was not unique. The list is long of Internet companies that did the wrong things. Point being that the challenge of staying the course and innovating are not unique to old media. Far more net companies failed to innovate and died than old media companies. In fact, old media companies probably have a far higher survival rate through the transition of the last four years than medium- to large-sized Internet companies did after the bubble.

**But hasn't the horse already left the barn on free Internet news? Can it somehow be herded back in?**

Nothing is ever written in stone in the digital universe.

**I love that insight—that nothing is unchangeable in the digital universe. It's an idea that could cost you a bunch of money. It encourages risk, informed risk, but risk nonetheless, doesn't it?**

Selective risk-taking.

**Why have you sponsored journalism operations like Dan Rather on HDNet and the investigative start-ups bailout-sleuth.com and sharesleuth.com? Are these selective risks? Or are they more properly seen as experiments with costs**

**low enough that failure would not be a financial disaster? How do you measure their success?**

The websites are because I have a strong distrust for the one percent of government employees who put their careers ahead of doing the right thing. These efforts were a response to that. If we catch one government crook or provide the information that allows someone else to do so, it will have been worth it. I consider it a small price to pay for doing a civic duty. I consider it a patriotic effort.

If sharesleuth continues to discover less-than-savory activity in the business world, it's worth it.

Dan Rather Reports is part of HDNet, which has been successful. We don't disclose any numbers for any of the ventures. They are no one's business but ours.

**Did you see this post on Bradford Cross's Measuring Measures blog: "Why the iPad is Destroying the Future of Journalism"? (<http://bit.ly/BCMMiPAd>) The guy argues that subscription models are doomed.**

He didn't really say anything other than he doesn't like subscription models and media should make their content available everywhere and sell more ads. Nothing new or interesting there.

First of all, the Internet is not the only place news is consumed. He doesn't even reference the revenue aspects of physical media and location-based media. He doesn't reference the connection media has with subscribers (undermonetized, but it's there).

He also doesn't discuss whether the traffic from search engines and even Facebook offers any monetary value. Just another Internet guy saying traffic must equal profits, so create more traffic. Doesn't work that way.

The biggest thing he missed is the fact that there is just as good a chance that the ad revenue generated by Google/Facebook referrals can go away as quickly and completely as the ad dollars newspapers had generated via classifieds. The "incumbent" source of revenues is just as vulnerable today as it was in previous years.

The only thing he got right was the fact that silos are not the best way to sell content. **CJR**



## Sunrise on the Nile

*Egypt's news media enter a new era*

AS EGYPTIANS TRIED TO SHAKE LOOSE NEARLY THIRTY YEARS OF DARKNESS, THE Egyptian press stumbled toward the sunlight, too. The early results portend vast journalistic shifts, and maybe not just in Egypt.

Egypt's media have long been dominated by the state, as is true in much of the Arab world today. Egyptian journalists at the state-run outlets have traditionally been blind to the most pressing news while casting former president Hosni Mubarak as the people's Pharaoh. Journalists who dared to touch taboo issues faced prison or heavy fines. News outlets that offended the regime were simply shut down. Independent bloggers were harassed and hounded by government-paid thugs.

It came as no surprise that when Al Jazeera, the fifteen-year-old Qatar-based outlet, defied threats and continued saturation reporting of the January 25th uprising, its Egyptian satellite signal was cut, its license pulled, and some of its journalists arrested. But Al Jazeera and its more conservative competitor, Dubai-based Al Arabiya, persevered. Along with a group of fearless bloggers and social media users, they cemented their place as the alternative to the state-run media's lies.

In so doing, they underscored the necessity of honest, fearless reporting as a prerequisite for democratic change. The strongest message from Tahrir Square to journalists from Riyadh to Rabat is that stories that speak the truth carry the most power.

As the Mubarak regime's shackles began to slip, Egyptian media reports began to change dramatically as journalists discovered their voices and consciences. *Al Masry al Youm* (Egypt Today), one of the country's fledgling independent newspapers and a frequent regime critic, reported accounts of government thugs staging lootings. It challenged state media for spreading a "culture of fear" and conspiracy theories about Israeli-trained protestors. Journalists at *Al Ahram*, the government's main mouthpiece, and at *Rose al Youssef*, another state-run paper, held demonstrations at their offices decrying corruption in journalism and lack of professionalism.

Some high-profile state television journalists took leaves of absence in protest of orders from on high to continue broadcasting propaganda. Shahira Amin, a prominent presenter, resigned. She told Al Jazeera's English language service that she couldn't "feed the public a pack of lies."

While the upheaval's fate was still unclear, Mohammed Ali Ibrahim, editor of *Al Gomhouriya*, a major state-run newspaper, addressed the protestors in a front-page column, saying, "We apologize for not hearing you, and if we heard you, for not paying attention to your demands."

His apology was noted in *Al Ahram's* English-language weekly, which also called out the state-run news media's "reliance on exaggeration or outright lies" and re-

fusal to tell the protestors' stories. (*Al Ahram* didn't mention its own record.)

This newfound honesty was only able to flourish after a path had been cleared both by journalists and social media users who risked their lives openly defying the government. Despite beatings and arrests, many journalists and bloggers persisted, bolstering morale by churning out ground-level accounts of critical events.

Twitter and the like became electronic megaphones, delivering both practical news (what streets were safe, where medics were needed) as well as charting participants' emotions as they raced between elation, despair and, ultimately, absolute joy. Unlike failed protest drives by more established groups, youth-driven Facebook pages assembled thousands of supporters online and united disparate sectors of the eighty-million-person nation.

Just as the Tunisian upheaval inspired Egypt's protestors, Arab journalists cannot ignore what happened in Egypt, the most populous Arab country. Although much of the region's news media live under the thumb of the government, political parties, religious groups, or others who think they own the truth, Egypt has shown that it does not always have to be thus.

Online news operations have sprouted, angering and frustrating authorities in places like Kuwait and Jordan. Young Arab journalists are showing new daring in their reporting, and are coordinating across the region.

Arab journalists face great challenges even beyond government bullying: low pay, low respect, and editors too timid to make changes. As Egypt's upheaval was evolving, Hisham Kassem, *Al Masry al Youm's* first editor, likened the state-run media's performance to a "crash-landing." Speaking from Cairo, he said honest news coverage was gathering steam, but was not yet surging because editors didn't know what lay ahead.

But the morning after Mubarak resigned, *Al Ahram* editors saw the future and rose to embrace it. They greeted readers with a stunning, bright red headline flared across its front page: THE PEOPLE OVERTHROW THE REGIME. **CJR**

STEPHEN FRANKLIN, a former Chicago Tribune Middle East correspondent, has helped train journalists in Egypt.



## Hiding the Real Africa

*Why NGOs prefer bad news*

AND NOW FOR SOME GOOD NEWS OUT OF AFRICA. POVERTY RATES THROUGHOUT the continent have been falling steadily and much faster than previously thought, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research. The death rate of children under five years of age is dropping, with "clear evidence of accelerating rates of decline," according to *The Lancet*. Perhaps most encouragingly, Africa is "among the world's most rapidly growing economic regions," according to the *McKinsey Quarterly*.

Yet US journalism continues to portray a continent of unending horrors. Last June, for example, *Time* magazine published graphic pictures of a naked woman from Sierra Leone dying in childbirth. Not long after, CNN did a story about two young Kenyan boys whose family is so poor they are forced to work delivering goats to a slaughterhouse for less than a penny per goat. Reinforcing the sense of economic misery, between May and September 2010 the ten most-read US newspapers and magazines carried 245 articles mentioning poverty in Africa, but only five mentioning gross domestic product growth.

Reporters' attraction to certain kinds of Africa stories has a lot to do with the frames of reference they arrive with. Nineteenth century *New York Herald* correspondent Henry M. Stanley wrote that he was prepared to find Zanzibar "populated by ignorant blacks, with great thick lips, whose general appearance might be compared to Du Chaillu's gorillas." Since the Biafran War, a cause célèbre in the West, helped give rise in the late 1960s to the new field of human rights, Western reporters have closely tracked issues like traditional female circumcision. In the 1980s, a famine in Ethiopia that, in fact, had as much to do with politics as with drought, set a pattern of stories about "starving Africans" that not only hasn't been abandoned, but continues to grow: according to a 2004 study done by Steven S. Ross, then a Columbia journalism professor, between 1998 and 2002 the number of stories about famine in Africa tripled. In Kenya, where I was a Peace Corps volunteer in the late 1960s and where I returned to live four years ago, *The New York Times* description of post-election violence in 2007 as a manifestation of "atavistic" tribalism carried echoes of Stanley and other early Western visitors.

But the main reason for the continued dominance of such negative stereotypes, I have come to believe, may well be the influence of Western-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international aid groups like United Nations agencies. These organizations understandably tend to focus not on what has been accomplished but on convincing people how much remains to be done. As a practical matter, they also need to attract funding. Together, these pressures

create incentives to present as gloomy a picture of Africa as possible in order to keep attention and money flowing, and to enlist journalists in disseminating that picture.

Africans themselves readily concede that there continues to be terrible conflict and human suffering on the continent. But what's lacking, say media observers like Sunny Bindra, a Kenyan management consultant, is context and breadth of coverage so that outsiders can see the continent whole—its potential and successes along with its very real challenges. "There are famines; they're not made up," Bindra says. "There are arrogant leaders. But most of the journalism that's done doesn't challenge anyone's thinking."

OVER THE PAST THIRTY YEARS, NGOS have come to play an increasingly important role in aid to Africa. A major reason is that Western donors, worried about government corruption, have channelled more funds through them. In the mid-1970s, less than half a dozen NGOs (like the Red Cross or CARE) might operate in a typical African country, according to Nicolas van de Walle, a professor of government at Cornell, but now the same country will likely have 250.

This explosive NGO growth means increasing competition for funds. And according to the head of a large US-based NGO in Nairobi, "When you're fundraising you have to prove there is a need. Children starving, mothers dying. If you're not negative enough, you won't get funding." So fierce is the competition that many NGOs don't want to hear good news. An official of an organization that provides data on Somalia's food situation says that after reporting a bumper harvest last year, "I was told by several NGOs and UN agencies that the report was too positive."

Rasna Warah, a Kenyan who worked for UN-Habitat before leaving to pursue a writing career, says that exaggerations of need were not uncommon among aid officials she encountered. "They wanted journalists to say 'Wow.' They want them to quote your report," she says. "That means more money for the next report. It's really as cynical as that."

Western journalists, for their part, tend to be far too trusting of aid offi-

cials, according to veteran Dutch correspondent Linda Polman. In her book *The Crisis Caravan*, she cites as one example the willingness of journalists to be guided around NGO-run refugee camps without asking tough questions about possible corruption or the need for such facilities. She writes, "Aid organizations are businesses dressed up like Mother Teresa, but that's not how reporters see them."

PUSHED AND PULLED BY SLASHED budgets and increased demands, journalists are growing increasingly reliant on aid groups. Sometimes that involves not just information or a seat on a supply plane, but deep involvement in the entire journalistic process.

In an online essay written in 2009, Kimberly Abbott of the International Crisis Group discussed a 2005 *Nightline* program on Uganda that her NGO

helped to produce and fund. It was hosted by actor Don Cheadle, the star of *Hotel Rwanda*. *Nightline*'s Ted Koppel explained in his introduction, as retold by Abbott: "Cheadle wanted his wife and daughters to get a sense of the kind of suffering that is so widespread in Africa. The International Crisis Group wanted publicity for what is happening in Uganda. And we, to put it bluntly, get to bring you a riveting story at a greatly reduced expense." According to Abbott, "versions of such partnerships are happening now in print and broadcast newsrooms across the country, though many are reluctant to discuss them too openly."

Daniel Dickinson, a former BBC reporter who is now a communications officer for the European Union in Nairobi, has seen the impact of technology and economics on reporting on Africa first-hand. "The big difference in the past five to ten years is the expansion

of the Internet," he says. "Journalists have got to feed these animals. Add to that the financial crash, and more and more internationals are taking the content we offer them."

Ben Parker, co-founder and head of IRIN, a news agency that is part of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, admires Dickinson's success. "He does stories and they're picked up whole," Parker says. IRIN itself can point to many similar successes in finding takers for its stories on aid projects. "The Western media won't reprint us verbatim," he says. "But some plagiarize."

Lauren Gelfand, a correspondent for *Jane's Defence Weekly* who is based in Nairobi, says most reporters she knows string for three or four news organizations to make ends meet, and can't afford to do time-consuming stories. She saw the effect when she took a year off



**The sell** NGOs have incentives to portray a continent in its worst light. Above, a fish market in Lome, Togo.

from journalism to work for Oxfam. "If reporters were going to cover a development story it had to be easy," remembers Gelfand, noting that the simplest sell was a celebrity visit to an aid project.

an NGO, she had published inflated population estimates using UN-Habitat data, despite knowing there was no consensus on the numbers among her former colleagues at the organization. Some-

saying, "Unless an urgent rescue package is developed to accelerate fulfillment of all the MDGs, we are likely to witness the greatest collective failure in history."

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## Western-based NGOs tend to focus not on what has been accomplished but on convincing people how much remains to be done.

Gelfand says that her Oxfam experience helped her to understand just how much attention NGOs put on getting their story told. "All the talking points are carefully worked out.... It's a huge bureaucracy and there are as many levels of control as in any government," she says of Oxfam, adding that many NGOs are reluctant to cooperate with media unless they know they'll be shown in a positive light.

To be fair to the NGOs, Gelfand says, "It's easier to sell a famine than to effect real, common-sense policy change." And, she says, she continues to believe that most aid workers do what they do because they want to make a difference. Nonetheless, "A lot of what Oxfam does is to sustain Oxfam."

Stories featuring aid projects often rely on dubious numbers provided by the organizations. Take Kibera, a poor neighborhood in Nairobi. A Nexis search of major world publications found Kibera described as the "biggest" or "largest" slum in Africa at least thirty-four times in 2004; in the first ten months of 2010 the claim appeared eighty-three times. Many of those stories focused on the work of one of the estimated 6,000 or more local and international NGOs working there, and cited population figures that ranged as high as one million residents. Recently, however, the results of Kenya's 2009 census were released: according to the official tally, Kibera has just 194,269 residents.

In 2010, Rasna Warah wrote in the *Daily Nation*, a Kenyan paper, that while working for the Worldwatch Institute,

time after 2004, she wrote, population estimates for Kibera started to rise, and "Before we knew it, the figure spread like a virus." She added, "The inflated figures were not challenged, perhaps because they were useful to various actors.... They were particularly useful to NGOs, which used them to 'shock' charities and other do-gooders into donating more money to their projects in Kibera."

Questionable figures of another sort are to be found in reports on the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, a series of targets on poverty reduction and other measures of well-being. UN and NGO officials routinely describe Africa as failing to meet the goals, and the press routinely writes up this failure.

But some experts, among them Jan Vandemoortele, one of the architects of the MDGs, have expressed concern that the goals are being misused. He wrote in 2009 that the MDGs were intended as global targets, but have been improperly applied to individual countries and regions. "It is a real tragedy when respectable progress in Africa is reported as a failure by international organizations and external observers," Vandemoortele wrote, voicing the suspicion that particular measurements have been selected "so as to present Africa as a failure, solely to gain support for a particular agenda, strategy, or argument."

Nonetheless, when the UN met in September, The Associated Press quoted UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as saying, "Many countries are falling short, especially in Africa," while the *Los Angeles Times* quoted an Oxfam report as

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SKEWED OR INCOMPLETE reporting on Africa are not just a disservice to readers but also have the potential to influence policy. "The welfare model [of Africa] is still dominant on the Hill and in Hillary Clinton's world," according to van de Walle. Among corporate officials, says Catherine Duggan, an assistant professor at Harvard Business School, the perception is still that "Africa is where you put your money once you've made it somewhere else."

Moreover, such reporting is demoralizing to Africans working for change. Martin Dawes, a UNICEF regional chief of communication for West and Central Africa, says that when there is a disaster, journalists "come to us as aid workers but often don't talk to the government, which is often what we're working through. It means that the chances for Africans to show an engaged response is limited. They are written out of their own story."

Even with shrinking resources, journalists can do better than this. For a start, they can stop depending so heavily, and uncritically, on aid organizations for statistics, subjects, stories, and sources. They can also educate themselves on how to find and interpret data available from independent sources. And they can actively seek out stories that deviate from existing story lines.

But in the end, it will probably take sustained economic progress to break the current mold. Sunny Bindra, the Kenyan management consultant, recalls that in the 1980s, "Japan got attention because it was whacking the US. It's the same with India and China now." Until that happens, a sick African woman in labor will continue to be treated as poverty porn, and most Africans will have to starve in order to make it onto the evening news. **CJR**

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The screenshot shows the website's layout with a navigation bar at the top containing links like 'About Us', 'Contact', 'Advertise', and 'Donate'. The main header features the 'COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW' logo and the tagline 'Strong Press, Strong Democracy'. Below this is a horizontal menu with categories: 'Desks', 'Blogs', 'Columns', 'Talk', 'Magazine', 'Multimedia', 'Projects', 'Resources', and 'Search'. The central content area is dominated by a large image of a fox's face, with the headline 'Dumb Like a Fox: Fox News isn't part of the GOP; it has simply (and shamelessly) mastered the confines of cable' by Terry McDermott. To the right, a 'DESKS' section lists various topics such as 'Campaign Desk: Politics & Policy', 'The Audit: Business', and 'The Observatory: Science'. At the bottom, there are sections for 'The News Frontier' and 'The Observatory', each with a brief article preview. A footer at the very bottom includes 'The Kicker' and a timestamp 'last updated: Tue 2:25 PM'.

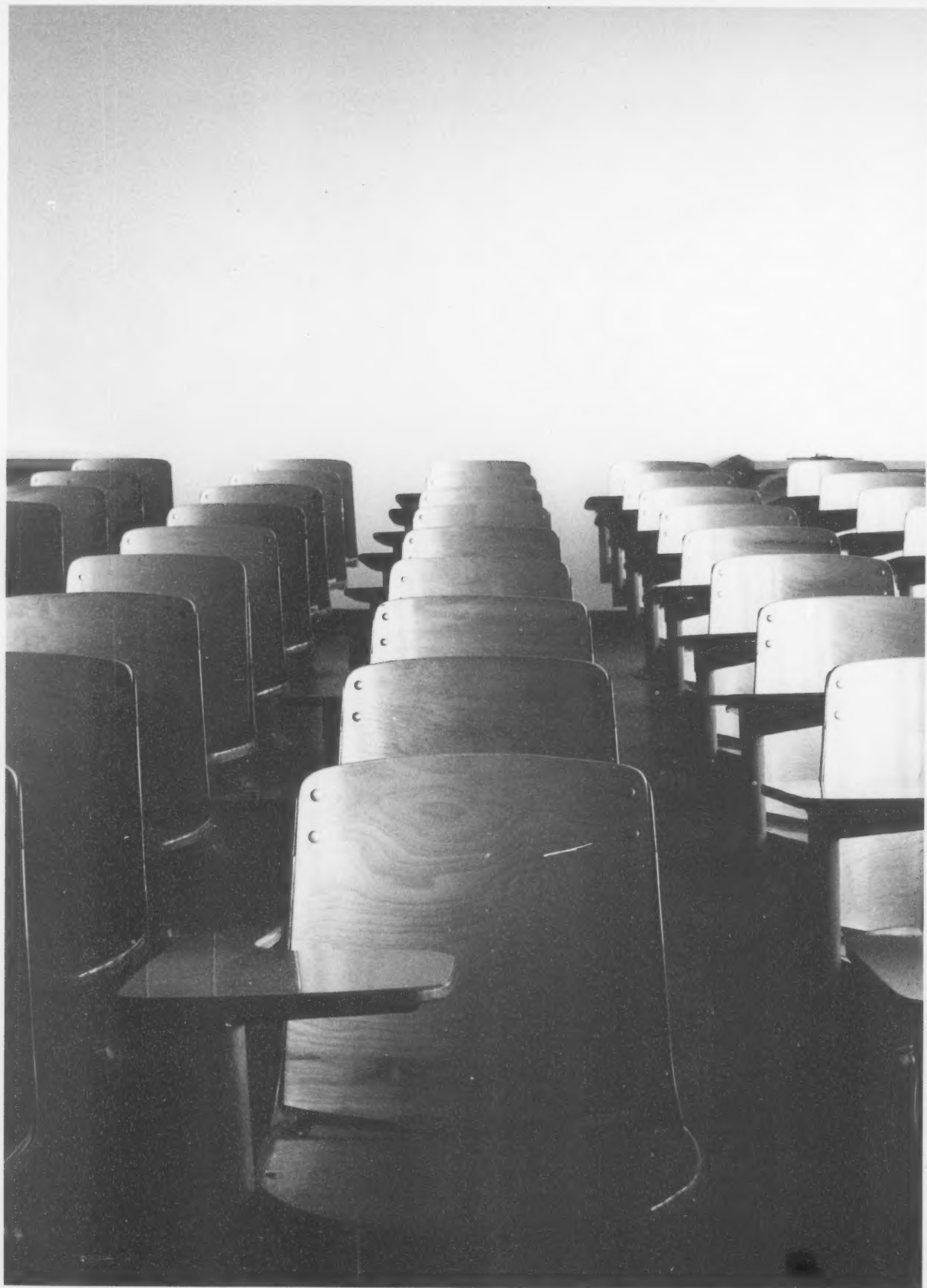


**THE AMERICAN NEWSROOM** SEAN HEMMERLE









# Tested

*Covering schools in the age of micro-measurement*

BY LYNNELL HANCOCK

Eleven New York City education reporters were huddling on e-mail last October 20, musing over ways to collectively pry a schedule of school closings out of a stubborn press office, when the chatter stopped cold. Word had filtered into their message bins that the city was about to release a set of spreadsheets showing performance scores for 12,000 of the city's 80,000 teachers—names included. Few understood better than

the beat reporters that this wonky-sounding database was a game changer.

The *Los Angeles Times* already had jolted newsrooms across the country back in August, when it published 6,000 public school teachers' names next to its own performance calculations. New York education reporters, though, were considerably more reluctant to leap on this bandwagon. They found themselves with twenty-four hours to explain a complex and controversial statistical analysis, first to their editors and then to the public, while attempting to fend off the inevitable political and competitive pressure to print the names next to the numbers, something nearly every one of them opposed. "I stayed up all night kind of panicked," said Lindsey Christ, the education reporter for the local NY1 television station, "writing a memo to everyone in the newsroom explaining what was coming and what was at stake."

It may seem odd that a geeky algorithm has become such

a hot topic in education, but it is another indication of how a group of well-connected newcomers to the contentious world of education policy has influenced the national conversation on the subject. As a group—mostly Wall Street financiers, political lobbyists, and venture philanthropists—they are drawn to the tools and terms of business economics. In this case, that means something called "value-added metrics," which estimate the worth of a teacher by analyzing her students' test scores over time.

Supporters of this technique argue that teacher evaluations require objective rigor, calculated with statistics. Weak teachers, they argue, should not hide behind a subjective, protective system that undermines children's futures. Critics counter that the calculations are incomplete, misleading, and often wrong. Teachers wonder how a number built on test questions can capture what it takes to help a student wrestle with ideas, say, or learn to write with voice. Wouldn't it make more sense, they ask, to use student work, peer mentoring, and rigorous classroom observations for a more meaningful evaluation? Economists on all sides of the debate agree that these stats cannot paint a whole picture of effective teaching. So, the critics say, why print them indelibly next to teachers' names?

But numbers have an allure. Governors and mayors facing huge budget cuts are demanding easier ways (read: rankings) to fire the worst teachers and reward the best. Washington likes numbers too. In the past year, eleven states including New York, Florida, and North

Carolina have agreed to use student scores to evaluate teachers in exchange for federal Race to the Top grants.

So perhaps it was inevitable that elements of the free-market reform movement would land in the laptops of New York's education reporters, with enough force to diminish the quality of the conversation about the city's public schools.

THE BATTLE OVER THE NUMBERS IS IN PART A BATTLE OVER control. For decades, neither of the two national teacher unions has done enough to shed their more arcane rules, which has made innovation difficult. Still, the assault surprised the unions at first, mostly because it came from unexpected places, including the press. Steven Brill's lopsided 2009 piece, "The Rubber Room," in *The New Yorker*, was among the first to frame the current reform climate. He portrayed a war between good-guy marketplace reformers and

villainous unions, blistering the UFT, the United Federation of Teachers, for its part in negotiating rules that led to the city's practice of warehousing tenured teachers faced with discipline cases into "rubber rooms," with little to do but punch the clock. The powerful union deserved the ridicule. Still, Brill allowed Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, the story's white-hat protagonist, to dance around the irony that he had been in charge of the system, and thus the so-called "rubber rooms," for seven years.

When eliminating teacher tenure became the movement's silver bullet, a March 2010 *Newsweek* cover story jumped on the cause: "The Key to Saving American Education: We must fire bad teachers." That followed an iconic 2008 *Time* cover that established then-DC school chancellor Michelle Rhee as the movement's celebrity executive. Rhee was pictured broom in hand, poised to sweep bad teachers away.

The next salvo came with the Fall 2010 opening of *Waiting for Superman*, the emotionally charged and popular documentary that identifies poor classroom teachers as the primary cause of urban school failure. Promoted with the help of foundation support (Gates, Walton, Broad) and star power (Oprah Winfrey), the film promoted a now-familiar drumbeat: fire bad teachers, close failing schools, open privately run charter schools, incentivize teaching. NBC dedicated a week in September 2010, coinciding with the film's release, to stories on public education, mining the film as its main source of ideas. Critics later exposed factual errors in the documentary and took issue with its agenda, which may have had something to do with the film's failure to win an Oscar nomination. But in the fall, broadcast anchors and national columnists were using the documentary as a crash course.

The *Los Angeles Times* could not have chosen a better climate in which to launch its investigative project, "Grading the Teachers." On August 14, 2010, the paper ran its first stories, and announced it would soon publish its own value-added ratings for 6,000 local elementary school teachers. Names included.

The idea had taken root in 2009, when education reporter Jason Song wrapped up a series called "Failure Gets a Pass," about teacher discipline. Investigative reporter Jason Felch then joined Song to look further into evaluations. Frustrated by the district's lack of hard numbers, the reporters and editors decided to calculate their own. The paper hired a respected economist from the Rand Corporation, Richard Buddin, who created a teacher-performance analysis using students' third through fifth grade state math and reading exams.

Bold and gutsy, no question. No major news outlet had ever attempted to develop its own job performance system for individual public employees, let alone for something as nuanced as what teachers do. *Times* reporters and editors had thought through some of the ramifications. Before publication, the paper set up a website open only to the 6,000 teachers, so they could log in early and post comments if they wished. (About a third of the teachers did so.) Sidebars included an airing of the data's shortcomings and the newspaper's methodology.

Caveats aside, the sum of the series is a strong endorse-

ment of the value-added model—inevitable, perhaps, because it used the paper's own. "By the time we were done with the reporting," said Felch, "we found this was a very, very valuable statistic." It was certainly popular. The *Times*'s teacher-rating site has attracted 1.8 million hits since it was launched; each of its page-one stories ranks among the most read of the year.

HERE'S A SIMPLIFIED LOOK AT HOW VALUE-ADDED MODELS work: analysts estimate how well a child is expected to score on reading and math tests this year by looking at her past results. The difference between the estimate and this year's actual score is attributed to the current teacher, for better or for worse. Each teacher's effectiveness with multiple students over several years then is boiled down to one statistic—a percentile ranking that ranges from most to least effective compared to his or her peers.

Most teachers fall into the vast middle of the bell curve, where one score is virtually indistinguishable from another. Experts agree: the numbers are much more useful for the very top and bottom teachers. The father of value-added education stats himself, economist William Sanders, told NPR's *Morning Edition* that he worries that parents using the data might jump to false conclusions about the teachers in the middle.

Proponents note that value-added numbers factor out "outside influences" like poverty and parents' education levels, because students are compared to themselves, not to one standard. The measures, then, are less likely to give teachers low ratings just because they teach disadvantaged children.

Still, their limitations are legion. First, only a fraction of a district's teachers are included—only those who teach reading and math; there are no standardized tests for other subjects. No allowance is made for many "inside school" factors, such as the effect of team teaching, after-school tutors, substitute teachers, a child or a teacher who is absent for long periods of time, or an unstable school environment—a new principal, a violent incident, a district overhaul. And finally, critics ask: Since the number is based on manipulating one-day snapshot tests—the value of which is a matter of debate—what does it really measure?

Research experts weighed in from all directions in response to the *Los Angeles Times* project, some saying value-added rankings may be flawed, but they are better than nothing; others said the numbers are only reliable enough to evaluate schools, not teachers. In February, two University of Colorado, Boulder researchers caused a dustup when they called the *Times*'s data "demonstrably inadequate." After running the same data through their own methodology, controlling for added factors such as school demographics, the researchers found about half the reading teachers' scores changed. On the extreme ends, about 8 percent were bumped from ineffective to effective, and 12 percent bumped the other way. To the researchers, the added factors were reasonable, and the fact that they changed the results so dramatically demonstrated the fragility of the value-added method. *Times* editor Russ Stanton disputed the claim that the Colorado



study discredited his paper's effort, saying it "shows only that their analysis, using somewhat different data and assumptions than we used, produced results somewhat different than our own." Thrusts and parries like these were not likely to help parents and readers make sense of it all.

But here is perhaps the most telling observation: nearly every economist who weighed in agreed that districts should not use these indicators to make high-stakes decisions, like whether to fire teachers or add bonuses to paychecks. The numbers, they said, can't carry that kind of weight. By last summer, it should be noted, Michelle Rhee had already fired twenty-six DC teachers based in large part on low value-added scores. And New York City wants principals to use them immediately for tenure decisions.

The first installment of the *Los Angeles Times*'s series featured a photo of a fifth-grade math teacher named John Smith, chalk in hand, standing before his class of mostly Latino students. One child is raising his hand, expectantly. The caption told the story: "Over seven years, John Smith's fifth graders have started out slightly ahead of those just down the hall but by year's end have been far behind."

Smith's silver hair and stern expression became the poster image for the series. The sixty-three-year-old was meant to illustrate the potential of these numbers to expose some teachers as failures (and others as triumphs), offering parents knowledge they never before had. As for the schools, some questions remained unanswered. Did these calculations add to what was already known? Hard to tell; the principal had refused to talk. In the end, readers only really knew what the numbers revealed—Mr. Smith's students slide 14 percentage points in math during the school year on average, compared to their peers across the city.

President Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, weighed in the following day endorsing the newspaper's move, later calling on all school districts to consider making such data public. Surprisingly, the *Los Angeles Times*'s own editorial page took a less hawkish tone, criticizing federal policies for pushing these numbers too far.

Policy aside, has the series helped LA's parents? Principals worried that hundreds of them might demand to transfer their children into the top-rated teachers' classrooms. That didn't happen. So far, said Felch, it has been mostly non-minority, middle-class parents, already engaged in the schools, who have contacted him with comments—some grateful, some skeptical. It seems that the stories have yet to reach many low-income parents. One reason for that may have to do with language. It took about a month for the *Times* to translate the series into Spanish, the language used by many parents of the district's majority Hispanic population.

IN NEW YORK, SCHOOLS CHANCELLOR JOEL KLEIN HAD anchored his eight years of public school overhaul on marketplace solutions that relied heavily on test scores and school report cards to drive curriculum and policy. His administration had spent a total of \$3.6 million to collect teacher value-added data over three years. Last year his department had released the teacher ratings to *The New York Times*—with school names and teachers' names blacked out. This year, before he left to join Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation as a \$4.5-million executive, Klein was prepared to release everything. The national mood had shifted.

On October 20, reporters from the *Times*, the *New York Post*, the *New York Daily News*, *The Wall Street Journal*,



**Adding value?** Teacher Melanie McIver and, behind her, principal Elizabeth Phillips, on the job at PS 321 in Brooklyn

GothamSchools.org, NY1 television, and WNYC public radio found themselves in an awkward spot. Some were so angry at what looked like a blatant attempt by the city to use reporters in its fight with the UFT that they quietly threatened to quit if their editors insisted on publishing names. Others were torn between the power of the data to inform—who are we to second guess readers' ability to process all this complexity, they asked—and their power to distort. On top of all the other distortions, the skeptics pointed out, the tests used to calculate these evaluations had been found to be flawed. The state had been forced to recalibrate the results because the tests had become too easy to pass.

The next day, reporters took a collective breath. The union filed suit in New York State Supreme Court, claiming the rankings were riddled with errors that would unfairly harm teachers. "Just because it's a number," the union's lawyer, Charles Moerdler, argued later, "doesn't mean it's suddenly objective." Nothing would be released until the case was settled.

The delay allowed time for news organizations to com-

pare notes. On Thursday evening, October 21, many of the reporters found themselves at a midtown Manhattan bar, sharing drinks with the same teachers union and Department of Education staff they had encountered in court earlier. The occasion was a farewell party for *New York Times* education reporter Jennifer Medina, who was moving to the paper's Los Angeles bureau. A guest from the union parked his oversized protest poster—displaying the city's confounding-looking mathematical formula for value-added numbers—against the bar. The debate from the courtroom spilled over into the festivities. School reps shrugged off complaints, reminding reporters it was they who had filed

lived in high concentrations of poverty. The federal Coleman Report issued the following year found that a child's family economic status was the most telling predictor of school achievement. That stubborn fact remains discomfiting—but undisputed—among education researchers today.

By the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan, concerned about the growing economic power of Japan, commissioned the groundbreaking report, "A Nation at Risk," which warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future." Reagan ushered in marketplace ideas intended to rattle government bureaucracy, such as choice, merit pay, and more testing.

By the 1990s, the era of standards and accountability was

#### A value-added model for a given subject, grade, and year

$$Y_{li} = \zeta + \lambda Y_{0i} + \beta' X_i + \sum_{l(\text{district})} \sum_{k(\text{school})} \sum_{j(\text{class})} \left\{ \alpha_{jkl}^{\text{class}} I_{Cijkl} + \alpha_{kl}^{\text{school}} I_{Sikl} + \alpha_l^{\text{district}} I_{Dil} \right\} + \varepsilon_i$$

Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) requests for the data. Werēn't they in the business of printing information?

But the Department of Education had privately dropped hints to some reporters that their competitors had already submitted FOILs, some journalists countered. Suspicions had been raised when the department responded to the FOILs with uncharacteristic speed. Normally, such requests took months, with layers of negotiations, said Maura Walz, a reporter for GothamSchools.org, an independent online news service. This time, it was service with a smile. "The Department of Education wants this out," said Ian Trontz, a *New York Times* metro editor. "They have a lot of faith in these reports. They believe they are trustworthy enough to educate and empower parents."

Still, empowering parents had not seemed to be a top goal in the past for this administration. To the most skeptical reporters, it appeared as if the city was using them.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS MAY BE REVERED AS ENGINES OF OUR democracy, but Americans have never agreed on who should govern them or what they should teach. In the 1950s, the Cold War stirred America's anxiety that its schools were too soft to compete. In the 1960s, the civil rights movement elevated equal opportunity as the decade's school reform banner. President Lyndon Johnson signed the groundbreaking Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, which directed federal dollars into public schools where children

at full throttle. With it came a subtle change in language. Instead of "teaching children," pundits talked about "raising test scores" and "closing the achievement gap." James Crawford, president of the non-profit Institute for Language and Education Policy, traced the injection of the "achievement gap" into the national policy debate back to the presidential platform of George W. Bush, who seized an issue traditionally owned by Democrats. The idea of bringing the test scores of poor minority children on par with those of white children became the centerpiece of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. "Achievement gap is all about measurable 'outputs'—standardized test scores—and not about equalizing resources, addressing poverty, combating segregation, or guaranteeing children an opportunity to learn," Crawford wrote. "It shifts the entire burden of reform from legislators and policymakers to teachers and kids and schools."

That brings us to the current decade, where the very term "education reform" has shifted definitions. Elements of choice, competition, test-driven curricula, and incentive-based pay had been in the hopper for decades. What is new is the vast wealth and power of the dominant voices pushing those things, and their sharp focus on publicly funded and privately run charter schools, which currently educate about 3 percent of the nation's students.

At a recent Robin Hood Foundation gala, the Wall Street charity pulled in \$88 million in one evening from its hedge fund participants, much of the money targeted for New York City charter schools. Democrats for Education Reform, a

pro-charter political action committee with hedge-fund ties, has expanded its reach to ten states, including Rhode Island, Michigan, and Colorado. By far the most influential of all are the Big-Three venture philanthropies, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Walton Family Foundation, and Eli Broad's Broad Foundation, which often work in concert on issues like school choice and teacher effectiveness.

Stephanie Banchero, a longtime education reporter now at *The Wall Street Journal*, calls this group of people and organizations the "non-trationals," and welcomes their relatively combative presence on the beat. "It keeps us on our toes," she says. Caroline Hendrie, executive director of the Education Writers Association, calls them an "alternative establishment," noting their influence in raising the level of urgency and attention to public education. Diane Ravitch, the education historian, a former assistant secretary of education under George H. W. Bush, and a past advocate of school choice and accountability, calls them "bastions of unaccountable power."

An important story in the Winter 2011 edition of *Dissent* magazine by Joanne Barkan detailed their influence—amplified by the media—over urban school policy. In it, she quotes conservative education expert Frederick Hess, the nation's most vocal critic of the media's "gentle treatment" of the foundations. In the 2005 book, *With the Best of Intentions: How Philanthropy Is Reshaping K-12 Education*, he describes a credulous press that treats philanthropies like royalty.

What draws these venture philanthropists and Wall Street financiers to urban school reform, and to top-flight charter schools like Uncommon Schools and the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) network? One is the businesslike way the schools in those systems are run. They value standardized curricula and measures, incentives, as well as a young, flexible, nonunion teaching force. As a group, these reformers tend to believe that America's growing child-poverty rate and shrinking social services are used as excuses by educators. Results in schools like those in the KIPP network, they say, prove that poverty does not have to be an obstacle. They see themselves as warriors against the status quo, with leverage. "It's the most important cause in the nation, obviously," the manager of hedge fund T2 Partners, Whitney Tilson, told *The New York Times* in December 2009. "And with the state providing so much of the money, outside contributions are insanely well leveraged."

Money managers and economists share a common philosophy. Douglas Harris, an economist from the University of Wisconsin, described it best in a January 2011 *Education Week* column:

Economists tend to think like well-meaning business people. They focus more on bottom-line results than processes and pedagogy, care more about preparing students for the workplace than the ballot box or art museum, and worry more about U.S. economic competitiveness. Economists also focus on the role financial incentives play in organizations, more so than the other myriad factors affecting human behavior. From this perspective, if we can get rid of ineffective teachers and provide financial incentives for the remainder to improve, then the students will have higher test scores yielding more productive workers and a more competitive U.S. economy.

The critics see this as a soulless vision of American education, in which children are filled up with facts, tested "until they beg for mercy," as educator TheodoreSizer used to say, and moved into college ill-prepared to analyze problems and think creatively. They say the new reformers value statistics but ignore research—a recent Vanderbilt University study on merit pay that concluded that it does not work to raise student test scores, for example, or a 2009 Stanford University study that found that 83 percent of current charter schools were either worse than or equal to traditional public schools.

Seasoned educators with long track records of alternative ideas to inspire school leaders to get the most out of their schools and teachers tend to be off the media grid; the late TheodoreSizer's Coalition of Essential Schools is one example. New York's Performance Standards Consortium is another; the consortium includes dozens of urban public schools with high graduation rates that use sophisticated classroom-based teacher assessments and a curriculum that mirrors those in our best colleges.

"Somebody explain this to me," wrote principal George Wood last summer on his blog for the Forum on Education and Democracy, a national coalition of educators and reformers. Wood has served as principal of Federal Hocking High School in Ohio's Appalachian foothills for eighteen years.

In that time we have increased graduation and college going rates, engaged our students in more internships and college courses, created an advisory system that keeps tabs on all of our students, and developed the highest graduation standards in the state (including a Senior Project and Graduation Portfolio). But reading the popular press, and listening to the chatter from Washington, I have just found out that we are not part of the movement to 'reform' schools.

You see we did not do all the stuff that the new 'reformers' think is vital to improve our schools. We did not fire the staff, eliminate tenure, or pay based on test scores. We did not become a charter school. We did not take away control from a locally elected school board and give it to a mayor. We did not bring in a bunch of two-year short-term teachers.

Nope, we did not do any of these things. Because we knew they would not work.

BY DECEMBER, FRUSTRATION WAS MOUNTING AMONG THE New York reporters as they waited for the State Supreme Court judge to decide whether the teacher data should be released or not. Reporters described "a spirited debate" that erupted during an off-the-record pizza and wine farewell party for outgoing Chancellor Klein before Christmas. Several in attendance said reporters bombarded him with pointed questions about the data, and Klein defended their release, for the sake of parents' right to know.

Meanwhile, some reporters produced stories that attempted to add context to the controversy over the data. WNYC ran a story that examined what school districts in Denver, the District of Columbia, and Tennessee were doing with their value-added reports. Meredith Kolodner at the *Daily News* found a Manhattan middle school teacher who received a "zero" rating for her performance as an English teacher. The problem? Pamela Flanagan had never taught English,

only math and science. Sharon Otterman of the *Times* wrote a thoughtful piece that dug into some of the research. She reported on a 2010 Mathematica Policy Research institute study that warned the city's error rate was probably very large. That's because the Department of Education was using only four years' worth of students' tests to analyze each teacher (Los Angeles used seven years' worth). The study found that with only three years of data, the results were wrong 25 percent of the time.

Parents and community members remained off the radar, however. In New York, 5,000 parents sent protest letters to the Department of Education in December opposing the release of the teacher-data reports. "We believe there must be meaningful teacher evaluations in our children's schools," said Martha Foote, a Brooklyn PS 321 parent, "but humiliating teachers with unreliable information will only hurt them." Their letters did not make the news.

IN NOVEMBER, REPORTERS GOT ANOTHER SURPRISE. MAYOR Michael Bloomberg announced he would replace Klein with Cathie Black, a Hearst magazine executive who had neither government service nor education experience. *The New York Times* went on a rare offensive against the mayor's choice. Reporters continued to wait for the teachers union's case to be resolved, but by this time, the *Times*, the *Daily News*, the *New York Post*, and WNYC had all decided to print the data when it does arrive—names included. (*The Wall Street Journal* refused to disclose its plans.)

On January 10, State Supreme Court Judge Cynthia Kern ruled in favor of the city and the news organizations, saying that "there is no requirement that data be reliable for it to be disclosed." The union quickly filed an appeal. And at press time the data was stalled in court, again.

But as they waited, the news outlets were constructing databases to collect and report the numbers, which will be searchable by teacher's name, by school, and by district. WNYC, for example, is building an interactive tool that will try to provide context for individual teachers and caveats for the wide swath of statistical errors.

It was probably inevitable. Journalists by instinct and trade are usually in the role of arguing for full disclosure of public information, fending off cautious government arguments for moderation and restraint, not the other way around. That instinct, and the pressure of competition, eventually won out. After all, the information is public, some reporters noted, and the city is using it for tenure decisions and evaluations. "It's in the public interest," said Trontz of *The New York Times*. "If we find the data is so completely botched, or riddled with errors that it would be unfair to release it, then we would have to think very long and hard about releasing it."

The only holdout so far appears to be GothamSchools.org. "We plan to run a message saying why we are opposed to using the names," said Elizabeth Green, editor of the site and author of a forthcoming book, *Building a Better Teacher*. "I want to treat schools with as much dignity as we treat restaurants. We don't just splash grades A through F about

restaurants in the paper without explanation. We do individual stories. To be fair."

Perfection of the data is not the point, argues Arthur Browne, editorial page editor of the *Daily News*. The numbers, he said, will be "a net positive in terms of adding to the conversation about quality of teachers."

But what about the quality of that conversation?

In New York City, schools coverage has been largely tethered to the corporate reformers' agenda—mostly to a measuring tool for firing incompetents. Inadequate classroom teachers are without question a serious problem, as are the rules and systems that protect them. But it's unwise to think that weeding out the weak will address other pressing challenges facing teachers and schools and students across the city—the huge dropout rate among a rapidly growing Hispanic population, for one example, or the absence of good preschools for the rising number of poor children, or state budget cuts that are gutting core services to schools, and on and on.

I don't happen to know any education reporters who were drawn to this complex beat in order to pore over spreadsheets, or score an interview with Bill Gates as an education expert. Most pine for more time to spend in classrooms, in science projects with preschoolers, in rapt discussions with teachers or principals or parents. Most are inspired by education's expansive connections to culture, science, politics, and the world of ideas. The best education reporters are skilled at the invaluable art of connecting the dots for readers between policy from on high and reality in the classroom. Yet education reporters have increasingly found themselves herded toward a narrow agenda that reflects the corporate-style views of the new reformers, pulling them farther and farther away from the rich and messy heart and soul of education.

IN FEBRUARY CAME A NEW WEBSITE CALLED THE "MEDIA Bullpen," which, unfortunately, has the potential to help ensure that the conversation about school improvement will continue to revolve around a predictable script. This new watchdog newsroom plans to rate dozens of education stories daily using baseball metaphors—from strikeouts to homeruns.

The site is run by the Center for Education Reform, a DC-based advocacy group dedicated for the last eighteen years to promoting charter schools, and funded by the Walton family and the Bradley family, among others, including a \$275,000 grant from the ubiquitous Gates Foundation. Time will tell whether the Bullpen will use its influence to expand the democratic conversation about schools, or merely bully the press by trying to call all the pitches.

Early signs are discouraging. A job posting for managing editor said its ideal candidate would be a "passionate advocate for education reform." And we know what that means. **CJR**

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LYNNELL HANCOCK, a reporter specializing in education and child-and-family policy issues, has taught at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism since 1993. She is the director of the Spencer Fellowship for Education Journalism, a program that supports the work of mid-career journalists. Her most recent book is *Hands to Work: The Stories of Three Families Racing the Welfare Clock*.



# Open Mic

*A popular radio host tests press restrictions in Azerbaijan*

BY AMANDA ERICKSON

Khadija Ismayilova commands an audience. It's the first thing you notice about her, in a country ruled overwhelmingly by men, whether you are in her office or on the other end of her nightly broadcast. ¶ In Azerbaijan, although the press is nominally free, reporters are routinely harassed, beaten, jailed, and even murdered. But Ismayilova is on the air two hours a day, five days a week, demanding that government officials, opposi-

tion leaders, and other public figures acknowledge their mistakes and explain themselves. For her, no topic is off-limits and every issue is fodder for debate. During one recent show, she held forth on Azerbaijan's economy, quizzing two guests on why the country ranked so poorly in the Heritage Foundation's recently released Index of Economic Freedom. Then, she moved on to the rather heady question of whether Azerbaijan—a small, former Soviet state nestled between Russia, Iran, and the Caspian Sea—has any sort of ideology.

As she spoke, Ismayilova's three male producers fiddled with dials, screened calls, and read the texts and e-mails that were pouring in. Whenever there was something worth reading on the air, they sent her an instant message. One caller complained that the nine members of his family were living in a two-bedroom apartment while the country's ruling class got rich off of oil money. Another argued that Azerbaijan's ideology is set only by the president.

Ismayilova draws an audience of more than 10,000 listeners each day, in a country of roughly 9 million. While many journalists censor themselves, Ismayilova is famous for her dogged, devil's advocate approach to questioning her guests. When members of Azerbaijan's opposition party come on to her show, they ask her to bring on a representative from New Azerbaijan, the country's ruling party. "They say I'm much tougher to take on than the ruling party," she said with a laugh.

"I'm mean to everyone," she continued. "That's the way I like my show."

Ismayilova's honesty puts her at risk in Azerbaijan, where the government has severely cracked down on press freedom. The government has made it almost impossible for independent outlets to exist by keeping tight control over printing and advertising opportunities. It refuses to allow independent radio and television stations to broadcast on its airwaves.

Most troubling, attacks against journalists are increasing. The editor of an independent news magazine was murdered under suspicious circumstances in 2005. Two bloggers were jailed for over a year after producing a video that poked fun at the government's spending. Though the two were released in November, another editor remains behind bars.

The United States embassy has criticized the current media landscape. In its 2010 Advancing Freedom and Democracy Report, the State Department said it faces an "uphill effort" to promote democratic institutions like a free, robust press. But US officials are

forced to tread carefully. Azerbaijan is a crucial ally for the United States. It is one of the few pro-Western countries in the region, and it also plays a key part in the Afghanistan war—American planes are allowed to fly in its airspace and to use Azerbaijan airports to refuel. Azerbaijan also boasts a sizable oil reserve that Europe depends on, particularly during times of instability in the Middle East.

Ismayilova, thirty-four, said her reporting career began by accident. She studied Turkish literature in college and, while still in school, started translating for a Turkish newspaper, a job she kept after her 1997 graduation. Days after she started, the editor was desperate for someone to cover a news conference. Ismayilova went, and liked it. Within months, she had become a correspondent and editor at the newspaper. She left for another paper after fights with the management. Two weeks later, her new paper's whole staff quit because of a scandal between the publisher and the editor.



**Frank talk** No topic is off-limits on Khadija Ismayilova's popular radio show.

She went on to work at a series of other Azeri papers before landing at the Russian-language paper *Ekho*. The paper was created by reformers, and she quickly settled in, confident that this was a place where she could do hard-hitting investigative work. She published a piece that showed Azerbaijan had lost about half a billion dollars in investments because the government would not work with electric supply company Siemens. Thanks to her story, every household in Baku, the capital, received a free electric meter.

Her ability to investigate broadly changed after the 2003 presidential elections, though.

Azerbaijan's first stable president, Heydar Aliyev, was stepping down, and he hoped to hand power to his son, Ilham. In fact, it seemed that Heydar was willing to do almost anything to make that happen. Human Rights Watch accused the government of stacking election commissions, banning local non-governmental organizations from monitoring the vote, and obstructing opposition rallies. The Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe accused the government of fraud.

When the results were announced and Ilham was declared victorious, violent protests broke out in Baku. A handful of opponents were killed in the scuffle.

But *Ekho* didn't report on the violence, instead choosing to publish only the government line. Despite their sympathies, the editors feared that they might get arrested or shut down. "We would give the stories, and then at 2 a.m., when the papers would go to the printer, I would see that the story had totally changed," Ismayilova said. "The first night, I cut my last name out of the piece."

A couple of days later, she resigned.

Ismayilova went on to report for other publications, including the English-language *Caspian Business News* and EurasiaNet.org, an online outlet operated by the Open Society

Institute that reports on the Caucasus. But she was frustrated with Azerbaijan's reporting scene. She worked as a grant manager for a US-based media development program that focused on promoting international education. Eventually, she took a job in a consulting company assisting the government with investments outside the oil industry. She lasted four months.

"Corruption was taking place in front of my eyes," she said. "I discovered that my own principles are shaking." One day, she paid a small bribe to get a document she needed from a government agency to meet a deadline. That was the day she resigned.

Ismayilova moved to Washington, DC, and took a job reporting and translating for Voice of America. There, for a regularly scheduled radio program, she produced a recurring segment on the abuse of Azerbaijanis living in Iran. She got thankful letters, she said, from prisoners in Iran who said their torture stopped after Ismayilova aired their segments.

"I was having an impact," she said. But a new editor canceled the show and asked her to focus more on translation. Soon after, she returned to Azerbaijan to freelance and train investigative journalists. In 2008, when the position of bureau chief opened up at Radio Liberty, a US-funded news agency that operates in countries where press freedom is limited, Ismayilova was invited to apply.

She was offered the job, along with a daily two-hour radio show. A few months ago, Ismayilova gave up the bureau chief title because she was tired of the administrative tasks. But she continues to host her show, where she has developed a loyal following. One of her fans, an Azeri man from the United Kingdom, was so distraught when he heard that she was stepping down as bureau chief that he flew to Baku to support her. He, like others, was afraid that Ismayilova had been pressured to leave her post by the government, which is

infamous for using any means of influence to keep reporters and editors from airing any criticism.

### Hopes for Press Freedom Short-Lived

There were high hopes for a free press after Azerbaijan won its independence from Russia in 1991. But those who imagined a strong civil society were quickly disappointed. Shortly after the country gained its independence, the government began cracking down on the press. It put censorship laws into place that required prior approval before stories were published.

In 1998, the government got rid of these rules. Ironically, that made things worse. Police began arresting reporters who wrote stories that the government didn't like. Companies were banned from taking out advertisements in many opposition papers. Newspapers had to be printed at the Azerbaijan Publishing House, which is managed by the president's office.

"Self-censorship predominates, even in so-called opposition newspapers," said Rovshan N. Bagirov, who directs the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation in Azerbaijan. "The situation is very sad, and it's going down rather than improving."

Things got worse after Ilham Aliyev took power in 2003. The president is notoriously sensitive, and he has never given an interview to a local outlet.

"Ilham Aliyev's family is a taboo theme for journalists," said reporter Zamin Hacı, who says his editors have faced constant threat of arrest. "If the journalists freely criticize the ruling establishment, their newspaper is simply closed."

Blackmail became a common tactic: for example, last year, a sex tape of an opposition editor was released to the public. In 2009, the government forbade the BBC, Voice of America, and Radio Free Europe from broadcasting on its FM airwaves. Ismayilova's fans listen to her show on the Internet or with satellite or shortwave radios.

Then there are the arrests. Newspaper editor Eynulla Fatullayev was imprisoned in 2007 after publishing a series of stories that were highly critical of the Azeri government. Last year, two bloggers—Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade—were jailed for "hooliganism" after they produced a short video lampooning government inefficiency that went viral on the Internet. Milli and Hajizade were released in November 2010, though they are not allowed to leave the country.

There have been a handful of violent incidents against reporters. A reporter was kidnapped and tortured in Baku in March 2006. Two different news reporters have been stabbed. Yet another was attacked by security guards, who denied hurting him when he tried to take his claim to police. Editor Elmar Huseynov was shot and killed in 2005. Huseynov had edited *Monitor*, a weekly magazine that fed its readers a constant stream of scoops. In an open letter, jailed editor Fatullayev accused the government of killing Huseynov. Ismayilova discussed the charges on her show. Afterward, she was summoned to the Ministry of National Security, where officials tried to convince her to sign a paper agreeing not to talk or write about Huseynov's assassination. She refused.

The government denies any involvement in the crime, and it remains unsolved.

So far, Ismayilova has remained untouched. She said she

is careful about her actions and image in public. "I restrict myself a lot," she said. She quit smoking a year ago, but before that she would never light up in public, particularly outside of Baku, where women smoking is frowned upon. "I don't want people to stop sending their daughters to journalism school because of the bad publicity," she said.

There are other factors working in her favor to protect her from official harassment. She works for an international organization, which offers her a measure of protection. "If an employee of Radio Liberty is murdered, the government thinks that the FBI will investigate," said Emin Huseynov, who runs the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, a non-profit that tracks journalists in Azerbaijan. "Locals don't feel safe. Usually the arrest doesn't spark as much reaction as journalists operating in Western agencies."

Ismayilova avoids satire, which is what landed the two bloggers in jail. And she's one of the few popular female journalists in what is still a male-dominated profession. In Azerbaijan, it is taboo to jail a woman, and public opinion would likely turn on the government if the police were to beat up Ismayilova.

Her closest call came last year, after she and a colleague broke a story about Silk Way Holding, a company with an almost complete monopoly over Azerbaijan's airline industry. Using documents obtained from the State Committee on Financial Securities, Ismayilova and a colleague implied that the president's twenty-one-year-old daughter may have illegally privatized her share of the company.

Days after the story ran on Radio Liberty's website, Ismayilova's bureau chief received a call from the government asking why she published such provocative stories and whether she wanted to be "dealt with." But nothing else came of it.

The same is true of her other big scoops. She investigated the family businesses of Emergency Situations Minister Kamaladdin Heydarov, highlighted the government's efforts to artificially lower the infant mortality rate, and has reported on major environmental problems in some of the country's cities.

Ismayilova doesn't spend too much time worrying. She's still freelancing long-form investigative pieces for EurasiaNet.org and translating *The Kite Runner*, one of her favorite books, into Azerbaijani. All of this, of course, is in addition to the work of presenting a daily two-hour talk show with only one other full-time staffer. Mornings are spent scouring the news for topics, identifying potential guests, and sweet-talking them into coming onto the show. In the afternoon, she does her research and prepares questions. And then she's live from five to seven.

After one recent taping, she and her producer were talking through the next day's show. They had booked a popular comedian and actress for the second hour. The producer warned Ismayilova not to talk about politics with the actress. "It's not her thing," he said. At first, Ismayilova agreed. But then she paused. "If she starts praising the president, then it's fair game," she said.

On her show, no political claim goes unquestioned. **CJR**

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AMANDA ERICKSON is a Fulbright scholar based in Azerbaijan. She has previously written for The New York Times, The Washington Post, and GlobalPost.

# Unnecessary Secrets

*Opening government, from Ellsberg to Manning*

BY SANFORD J. UNGAR

Back in 1999—simpler times, perhaps—there was a little-noticed brouhaha in federal court over an effort to get several secret US government documents released through official channels. The James Madison Project, a Washington-based nonprofit that champions openness and accountability in government, especially on national security and intelligence matters, was sparring with the Central Intelligence Agency. At issue were what are believed

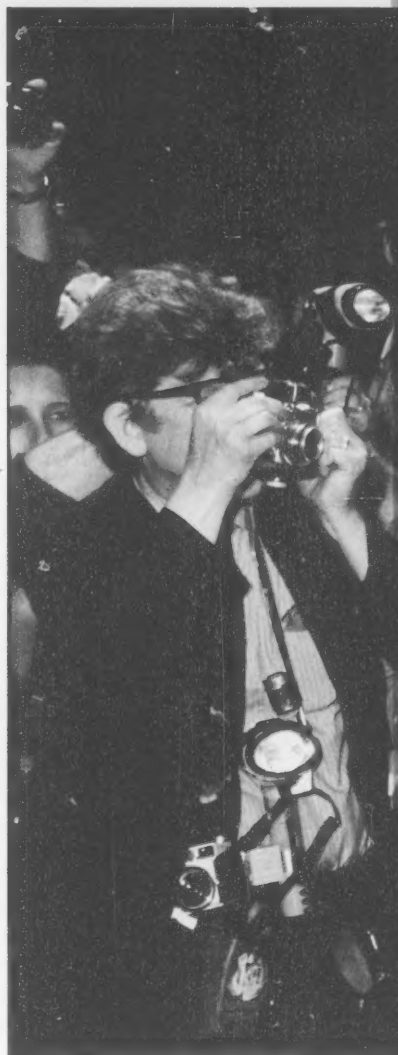
to be the six oldest classified documents held by the National Archives and Records Administration—memoranda created around 1918 describing methods for making and detecting the “secret ink” used by the German imperial government for espionage during the Great War.

The proceedings were respectful, which is typical of most litigation under the Freedom of Information Act, a law passed by Congress in 1966 to promote greater public knowledge of government decisions and actions. The plaintiffs pointed out that the details of America’s first encounter with the use of secret ink as spycraft had been revealed in a book published in 1931 by a disgruntled former State Department official who was a codebreaker during World War I. But the CIA, which did not exist at the time the memoranda were written yet came to control their distribution, was adamant: the documents could not be declassified, eight decades later, because the information would make its current covert communica-

tions systems “more vulnerable to detection...by hostile intelligence services or terrorist organizations.” In light of legal precedent requiring deference to the views of government national-security agencies in FOIA lawsuits, the judge in the case declined to order the documents declassified.

Twelve years on, the secret ink documents and others from the era stashed away in the Archives—now more than ninety years old—are still under review for declassification.

The incident comes to mind as the US government confronts the massive, and somewhat chaotic, hemorrhage of classified documents orchestrated in recent months by WikiLeaks, the new-age Internet operation with essentially the same goals as, but far more controversial methods than, the James Madison Project. News organizations around the world have published or broadcast stories based on WikiLeaks’s selections from classified documents and cables that reveal the inside and underside of current American foreign and defense policy,







**'America's most dangerous man'** Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers, prevailed against myriad federal charges.

including some especially sensitive revelations about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It seems clear that most, if not all, of the information comes from an extraordinary cache of documents to which a young soldier, Pfc. Bradley Manning, had access and allegedly passed along to WikiLeaks.

Thus far, the government's primary response to WikiLeaks has been to convene task forces to figure out what happened and how to tighten controls so that such an incident cannot occur again. One memorandum from the Office of Management and Budget warns of "insider threats" and urges that supervisors evaluate government employees for "trustworthiness," perhaps with the help of psychiatrists who can measure their level of unhappiness. What lurks beyond this frenzied reaction, however, is an international investigation leading to a deadly serious criminal prosecution that the Obama administration, as of this writing, is said to be preparing against Manning and Julian Assange, the enigmatic

Australian front man for WikiLeaks, under the Espionage Act (which was hastily drafted by Congress at about the same time that secret ink was seen to be such a threat). The implication is that Manning, who at press time is in solitary confinement on a Marine Corps base in Virginia, conspired with Assange, living on a vast estate in England while he fights extradition to Sweden for questioning on sex charges, to harm the national security of the United States.

Absent, at least from the government's public statements and actions, is any consideration of an obvious underlying problem: that the obsessive over-classification of US official information has reached a point where it is impossible to know with confidence what truly deserves to be kept secret and how that can be done effectively. The government's instinct to protect so many "secrets" also hinders democracy by keeping vital information from the public.

As it happens, the WikiLeaks drama unfolds as we approach

the fortieth anniversary of the publication of the Pentagon Papers, and it is useful to think about secrets through that prism.

When the late Robert S. McNamara, secretary of defense for presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, commissioned a group of "defense intellectuals" in the late 1960s to create a sober, thoughtful study of the evolution of one of America's worst foreign policy blunders, the Pentagon Papers—forty-seven volumes, in all their greyness—were intended as good reading, perhaps, in the 1990s or later. What the country got instead, beginning on June 13, 1971, just as President Richard M. Nixon's paranoia was building, was the sudden release of most of this material in *The New York Times*, then *The Washington Post* and elsewhere, revealing a sorry bipartisan history of lies and deception. This resulted in an epic court battle between the government and the press and, beginning a year later, the wild and unpredictable criminal trial—under the Espionage Act, among other statutes—of the main protagonist, former Pentagon official Daniel Ellsberg, who had leaked the Papers.

The Nixon administration was caught unawares by the revelations in the Papers, and went on an unseemly chase to figure out what the documents were, where they had come from, and how to control the presumed damage from their release. The panic was particularly poignant at the time because then-Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger was engaged in secret negotiations to open a relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China; he feared that Mao Zedong and Chou En-lai would suspend talks with a government that couldn't keep delicate matters confidential. He persuaded Nixon and his attorney general, John N. Mitchell, to go to court against the newspapers and seek a prior restraint on further publication. Kissinger, incredibly, dubbed Ellsberg "the most dangerous man in America" (the convenient title of a 2010 Oscar-nominated biopic that has been given new relevance, and more widespread screenings, by the WikiLeaks affair).

The pretext, of course, was national security—that continued exposure of details from a study officially classified "top secret" would do irreparable harm to the United States and its forces in Southeast Asia. Never mind that the *Times* had locked up an elite group of reporters and editors in a hotel suite for months to review the documents and compare what was already on the public record, in order to determine what was notable and worthy of public attention without putting the country or its troops at risk. In the context of an increasingly bitter atmosphere between Nixon and his critics—Vice President Spiro Agnew was routinely drawing cheers at the time with his attacks on the "nattering nabobs of negativism," and reporters were being hauled before grand juries and told to reveal their sources about the Black Panther Party and other controversial topics or risk imprisonment—there were political points to be scored by pursuing the newspapers.

The pursuit was intense and, with the benefit of hindsight, sometimes absurd. During one closed hearing in US District Court in Washington, when the late Judge Gerhard Gesell was to determine what in the Papers might be dangerous if revealed, representatives of Nixon's Justice Department insisted that the courtroom doors be locked and brown paper

taped over their small windows, lest the reporters lurking in the hallway be able to learn new secrets by looking in and reading lips. Appellate court deliberations went into the night, and presses were stopped awaiting the outcome.

For all its months in court, the government was never able to prove the slightest harm to national security as a result of the Pentagon Papers' disclosure. On the contrary, it is clear that the publication of the Pentagon Papers was immensely valuable as a contribution to the public dialogue about the Vietnam War. It did not end the conflict overnight, as Ellsberg might have hoped, but it certainly made opposition to it more acceptable and understandable.

### History, Off Limits

It would be encouraging to believe that the government has learned important lessons from the Pentagon Papers case and other, less celebrated ones since then. But in fact the problem of secrecy and the inappropriate classification of information valuable to the public has grown dramatically in recent decades.

Although the Archives routinely conducts a review of classified documents to evaluate whether they are eligible for release, its current backlog runs to some 417 million pages, mostly dating from the 1940s through the 1970s. It will only grow, given the natural human tendency for government bureaucrats to believe that if their work is important, it must be confidential (or secret, or top secret, or on up the line into "code-word clearances" whose existence is itself classified). At its best, the declassification process is quite cumbersome, with representatives of various agencies entitled to weigh in and block release of material that may not have caused concern in the agency where it originated. Thus, the gaping holes in some volumes of the official *Foreign Relations of the United States* issued by the State Department.

But it is the influx of new material in electronic form that has officials at the Archives reeling. According to Jason Baron, its director of litigation, there were 32 million e-mails transferred to the Archives from the Clinton administration, and the final number from the presidency of George W. Bush is expected to be about 250 million.

"At the present rate of e-mail creation," says Baron, the Archives "expects to receive over one billion e-mails over the course of the next decade as permanently accessioned records of the government." If all of those had to be reviewed for potential release under FOIA, he estimates, it would take a hundred people, working ten-hour days 365 days a year, fifty-four years to complete the task. Even the recent creation of a National Declassification Center within the Archives has not inspired optimism about solving the disastrous problem of classification run amok.

With one intelligence agency alone creating a petabyte (a million gigabytes, or the equivalent of 49 million cubic feet of paper) of new classified records every eighteen months, the US Public Interest Declassification Board, an obscure panel created under the inspiration of the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the New York Democrat, to advise the president on these matters (of which the author is a member),

has recently been entertaining potential schemes for “mass declassification.” At a public board hearing last September, Jeff Jonas, chief scientist of IBM Entity Analytics based in Las Vegas, asserted that the volume of classified documents may well be “beyond human, brute force review,” and he appealed for the introduction of “some form of machine triage” into the declassification process. Jonas promoted the concept of “context accumulation,” whereby computers would review classified documents and would, over time, gain increasing sophistication—with decreasing amounts of human input—about which truly need to be protected.

The threshold challenge would be to persuade federal agencies, especially the many involved in intelligence work, to trust such a bold new process; the hope would be that once it took effect, the pace of classification and the number of classified documents would eventually decrease, and thus potentially compromising leaks would become less likely and, some would argue, less necessary.

### Informed Consent

Meanwhile, until the new era dawns, the WikiLeaks case provides everyone an additional opportunity to live with the old. On the substance of the diplomatic cables that were distributed, it was difficult to claim damage to American national security. It may be awkward, say, for Saudi Arabia and certain other Middle Eastern states to have it known that they are every bit as worried about Iran as are Israel and the United States, if not more so, as revealed through WikiLeaks, but hardly a threat to anyone’s well-being. And for the Chinese to be identified as complaining that North Korea was behaving like a “spoiled child” is not terribly surprising.

“The members of the Foreign Service owe a great debt to Julian Assange,” observed Charles Peters in the *Washington Monthly*. “He got their cables read.” And Fareed Zakaria, writing in *Time*, said the published cables were “actually quite reassuring about the way Washington—or at least the State Department—works.” Indeed, leaked cables revealing foreign-service officers’ assessment of the precarious hold on power of the corrupt regime in Tunisia, just weeks before it fell, looked positively prescient.

In the end, it may have been the unpredictability and loss of control in the WikiLeaks case that most rattled the bureaucracy. Although the government lost both its civil and criminal cases involving the Pentagon Papers, it is remarkable in retrospect to what extent it managed to control the process at the time. In both New York and Washington, federal courts halted publication of the documents for almost two weeks—in effect granting a prior restraint on the free press—while government lawyers attempted to prove that grievous harm to national security was at stake.

The US government has seemed bewildered—helpless, really—in the face of the WikiLeaks disclosures. To seek even a temporary halt in publication by *The New York Times* would have been pointless, since other organizations outside the reach of the US judicial system could easily pick up the slack. Whereas it took a photocopying session followed by a plane trip to keep the Pentagon Papers moving from one newspaper

to another, WikiLeaks could stay ahead of the game with just a few keystrokes on a computer.

The WikiLeaks disclosures draw attention to an important lesson: the old-fashioned notion that democracy cannot function effectively without the informed consent of the governed, which requires timely access to accurate information across a broad spectrum of official activity. That access is more threatened than ever, as the mountain of needlessly classified government documents grows daily, and the result is to increase public suspicion and weaken government’s credibility. As a commission chaired by Moynihan said in its 1997 report, “[t]he best way to ensure that secrecy is respected, and that the most important secrets remain secret, is for secrecy to be returned to its limited but necessary role. Secrets can be protected more effectively if secrecy is reduced overall.”

On the surface, President Obama urged greater transparency in government when he came into office, and at the end of 2009, he issued an Executive Order requiring outside review of agencies’ classification guidelines and forcing those who create classified documents to identify themselves openly. But because the order allows top officials to delegate those decisions to an unlimited number of subordinates, it may make government even more opaque. Ironically, Manning’s alleged massive dump of documents to WikiLeaks seems to have resulted from a post-9/11 “reform” introducing greater sharing of material among agencies in an attempt to prevent terrorism.

Good intentions and noble rhetoric notwithstanding, Obama officials have gone after more alleged leakers of government secrets than any other recent administration. Since World War II, there have been only ten criminal indictments brought under the Espionage Act for the unauthorized disclosure of classified information; half of them were initiated during the still-young Obama presidency. The likelihood of success in such cases is low—only one of those indicted has been convicted, so far—but the prospect of intimidation and suppression of public debate is high. Only cynicism can result.

Those who would create greater respect for the sanctity of properly classified information would do well to heed the words of the late Erwin N. Griswold, former solicitor general of the United States, in a February 1989 *Washington Post* op-ed column in which he recanted, nearly eighteen years after he had tried, on Nixon’s behalf, to prevent the continued publication of the Pentagon Papers:

It quickly becomes apparent to any person who has considerable experience with classified material that there is massive overclassification and that the principal concern of the classifiers is not with national security, but rather with governmental embarrassment of one sort or another. There may be some basis for short-term classification while plans are being made, or negotiations are going on, but apart from details of weapons systems, there is very rarely any real risk to current national security from the publication of facts relating to transactions in the past, even the fairly recent past. **CJR**

SANFORD J. UNGAR, author of *The Papers & The Papers: An Account of the Legal and Political Battle Over the Pentagon Papers*, which won a George Polk Award in 1972, is president of Goucher College in Baltimore and a member of the US Public Interest Declassification Board.

# The Fixer

Meet Greg Scott, your guide to Junkieville

BY DON TERRY

Greg Scott is a fixer. In Chicago, where Scott plies his trade, the title is traditionally tapped for the slick wheeler-dealers who haunt the criminal-court corridors or City Hall. But there is nothing traditional about Scott, a forty-two-year-old, ginger-haired, Gonzo-worshipping, award-winning radio freelance citizen-journalist; an independent filmmaker and public health advocate, a tattooed, midwestern, tenured sociology

professor, dad, and little league baseball coach. Scott's clients aren't seeking zoning changes or friendly judges. They are journalists, some of whom pay him as much as \$450 a day, plus expenses, to guide them safely through the streets and alleys of "Junkieville"—Scott's name for Chicago's drug world. Once there, Scott fixes them up with the likes of Murdering Mike, Big Hands Laura, the Other Laura, Teardrop Rose, I'm-not-a-hooker-I'm-a-body-therapist Chrissie, Cat who fights like a man, Cadillac Don, Medicine Man, Pony Tail Steve, and Mortician Steve—no relation—as they tell their stories on camera.

"I'm the go-to guy for Junkieville," Scott said. For more than a decade, he has researched, documented, reported on, and most important to him, befriended the residents of Chicago's drug scene—the junkies, prostitutes, pimps, thieves, and panhandlers, and the crime boss he invited to his book-filled living room with a painting of Hunter S.

Thompson on the wall in suburban Oak Park one night last summer to be interviewed by a bossy bald Brit, Ross Kemp, who hosts a gritty, you-are-there style British television show, *Ross Kemp: Extreme World*.

Scott does his fixing inside crack houses, shooting galleries, brothels, seedy motels, and a dusty homeless encampment known as the Brickyard, where the residents—sometimes dozens at a time—live for hustling and heroin and where the "weekend warriors" visit for a couple of days before returning to their nine-to-five lives. George Hughes, a freelance television producer and director, is another Englishman who has used Scott's fixing services in recent years. Hughes was working for *Drugs Inc.*, the highbrow National Geographic Channel series, when he hired Scott as a consultant. Hughes flew from London to O'Hare International Airport in the fall of 2009 and drove into the city to meet Scott.

"I arrived there expecting to be eased into things," Hughes said. "But within a few hours I found myself in a crack house on the west side, meeting heroin dealers and addicts. For me that's stuff straight out of the movies. It surprised me how much they respected him. The relationship he had with them. They trusted him implicitly. We were welcomed into this place even though it was the den of iniquity. To have someone like Greg guide you through is invaluable. He is quite unique."

Hughes not only used Scott as a fixer, he put him on camera. Scott appears in the heroin segment of the series as "The

Medic," performing one of his many passions, working with addicts on the frontlines of HIV and AIDS prevention. Hughes was so impressed with Scott's abilities that he convinced the production company to hire him to work on the next installment of *Drugs Inc.* Scott was promoted from fixer to producer. In January, Scott spent three weeks fixing and producing a segment on crack in Chicago. As soon as the crack segment was wrapped, Scott began research for a segment on ketamine, a horse tranquilizer used as a date rape drug and known on the street as Special K. "I don't know anyone else in Chicago doing my type of work," he told me. "I can fix anything. Everybody has a knack. I just happen to have a knack for getting involved in illegal shit."

SCOTT CALLS WHAT HE DOES "IMMERSIVE SOCIOLOGY," "embedded journalism," and "all of the above." The work bag



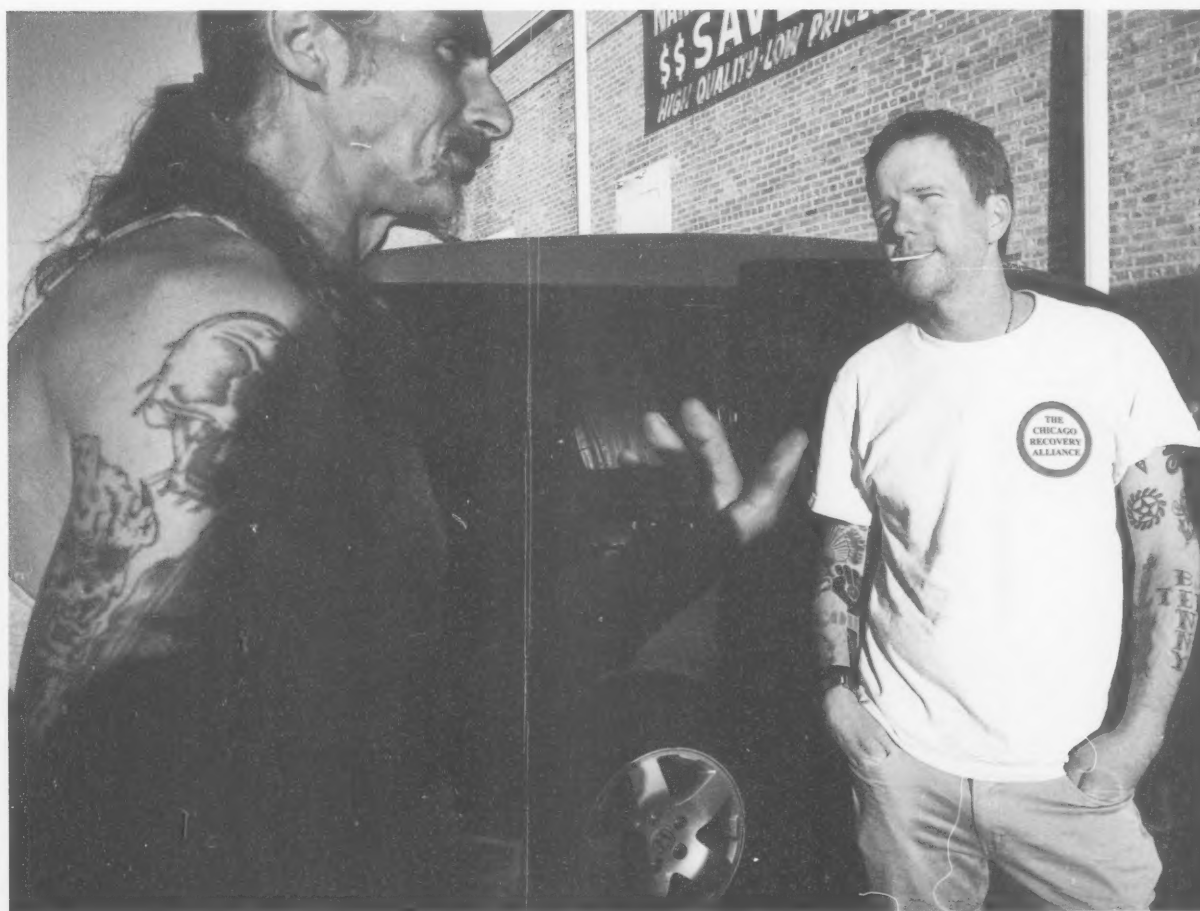
he carries slung over his shoulder is stuffed with naloxone, an overdose-reversal medication, as well as the condoms and clean syringes that he distributes for free. He is a member of the worldwide harm-reduction movement to prevent the spread of HIV, AIDS, and other diseases among injection drug users and their partners. An associate professor of sociology at DePaul University and director of the school's Social Science Research Center, Scott is also the volunteer research director for The Chicago Recovery Alliance, a twenty-year-old harm reduction group.

"He was way out there already, so he fit right in with us," said Dan Bigg, a co-founder of the Alliance. "He didn't need any extra training in how to treat people with respect. In addition to being a brilliant guy, he's very much a man of integrity. He uses that integrity for good. He just doesn't sit silently in a school office. He gets out in the real world."

Quite real. In early November 2008, Scott was working on one of his own sociology/journalism projects, filming Pony Tail Steve and his wife, Pam, as they shot up a couple of ten-dollar bags of heroin. Pony Tail slipped into a deep

nod and then fell backward. He was turning blue, overdosing—dying. Scott put the camera—a Panasonic HVX200—on a table and jumped into action. With the camera rolling, he and Pam went to work to revive Pony Tail, shaking him and roughly kneading his chest. Scott gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Nothing worked. Then Scott injected him with a syringe of naloxone, which brought Pony Tail back from the brink. (Paramedics and emergency rooms have used the drug for years to reverse overdoses.) Scott sold forty seconds of the near-death scene to a cable news network. He charged forty dollars per second (the proceeds went to Pony Tail and Pam). He also turned the scene into a naloxone how-to DVD for The Chicago Recovery Alliance.

Scott "fixes" journalists up with junkies to pay for his own habit—making short documentary films, most often set in Junkieville, such as *The Family at 1312*, about a band of crack addicts, and *Matrimony*, about the wedding of Pony Tail and Pam, his heroin-addicted lover. His award-winning journalism for WBEZ, the public radio station in Chicago, is also set in Junkieville. He traces his commitment to telling



Gonzo Fixer, journalist, sociologist, and harm-reduction advocate Greg Scott (right) at a drug users' mobile outreach site

the stories of the addicted to an encounter he had in 2003 with a heartbroken, heroin-addicted panhandler called Freeway. In the early 1990s, Freeway's infant daughter had died of SIDS. Within twenty-four hours, Freeway's wife was dead too, killed in a car crash. A week after the combined funeral for his wife and daughter, Freeway found himself in a dope den, smoking crack and snorting heroin. A few months later he was living on the street, panhandling to support his new habit.

When Scott ran into Freeway one night in 2003, Freeway was sitting on some railroad tracks, near the remains of his shack in the Brickyard. The day before, railroad police—or

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**'We need somebody to make our home movies for us, to get our lives on tape and share it with the rest of the world. Otherwise, man, we're gonna die invisible.'**

"bulls"—had come through and "evicted" him by setting fire to his makeshift shelter, for trespassing on railroad property. In a radio essay called "Brickyard Reflection," Scott said a "plume of oily-smelling smoke" rose into the sky as Freeway scribbled "furiously in a slightly charred notebook."

"Actually, he was drawing," Scott said in the essay. "As it turns out, the bulls had burned down his home and everything in it while he was out making money to buy the heroin he was using to self-medicate clinical depression. From memory he was trying to recreate by hand the image of his dead infant daughter, whose last remaining picture went up in flames."

"That night I decided that I would dedicate the rest of my life to living among, documenting, and telling stories publicly about the people who occupy what has become one of the lowest rungs in our society—the junkies, crack heads, dope fiends, and hookers who used to be our beloved mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, best friends, and neighbors."

SCOTT THE FIXER IS SCOTT THE BROKER, TEACHER, TRANSLATOR, story shaper, and protector of journalists and junkies on the shorter-than-many-people-think bridge between the straight world and the addicted one. "I have to do a lot of contextualizing," he said. "It's an opportunity for me to help shape the story, to help shape the image that gets out there.

What I want most out of all this is dialogue; a robust public dialogue about addicts and addiction."

It can be a dangerous job. He does his best to keep everyone out of harm's way. But if something goes wrong, he is not a bodyguard. In case of trouble, his advice is simple: Duck low. Run fast. That's exactly what the crew of *Ross Kemp: Extreme World* did last summer when a pissed-off pimp pulled a pistol.

Kemp and his crew were in town to do a show about heroin in Chicago, one of America's smack capitals. They had learned about Scott from Hughes and hired him to take the six-member crew into dope dens and introduce them to a pimp called Silk and to Baby, one of his prostitutes. Silk agreed to allow the crew to film Baby as she walked the street, trying to pick up customers. The money shot they were after was Baby getting into a car with a trick. The longer Scott and Silk talked, the more into the idea Silk got. He even asked Scott if he wanted him to slap Baby around on camera. Not too hard, Silk added. Scott declined.

Scott and the film crew set up out of sight as Baby began her stroll. They squatted down "in a thicket of bramble, trees, weeds, thorny bushes," he recalled in an e-mail. The humidity was high, the mosquitoes greedy. Everyone was a little jittery. Another prostitute approached Baby and began yelling at her that Baby was trespassing on her corner. Then the woman spotted Scott and the crew and phoned her pimp, while screaming at them to stop filming her "likeness." Scott tried to calm her and explain what they were doing. She continued to curse and scream.

A few minutes later a car whipped around the corner, screeched to a halt and the driver jumped out. One of the crew yelled, "He's got a gun." The gun, in fact, was pointed at them. Everyone ran.

No one was hurt, though, and it turned out the pimp with the pistol, a woman, was a friend of Silk's, and she apologized to Scott. "No worries," he responded. The shaken crew headed back to where they'd left Baby. She was getting into a car with a customer.

They missed the shot.

A FEW YEARS AGO, PRODUCERS OF WBEZ'S *EIGHT FORTY-EIGHT* morning news program were searching the halls of academia for a scholarly voice of authority to explain the ways of Chicago street gangs to their listeners. The producers found Scott. They quickly learned that gangs and thugs were "just a portion of the research he did in the street," said Aurora Aguilar, the program's senior producer. Scott pitched twenty of his own story ideas to Aguilar, including a series he longed to do about the Brickyard. By the time he met her, Scott had already collected dozens of hours of video and audio recordings of addicts, shooting up and spouting off about life on the edge. His story pitch lasted three hours. "We were amazed that he was able to learn so much about these people and gain their trust," she said.

Scott reported and produced a four-part series on the Brickyard. His work went on to win a Peter Lisagor Award from the Chicago Headline Club and a National Headliner Award. "It's the proudest moment I've had at the radio sta-

tion in nine years," Aguilar said. "We took the first piece on spec. This was the first time we worked with someone who had absolutely no experience producing radio. It was definitely a little risky to have someone who didn't go to Ethics 101, who has been involved with resuscitating someone who overdosed, and knew a lot of these people because he had given them clean needles. But he's responsible. He's careful. We can't wait to work with him again."

His work, she said, was down to earth, a little rough around the edges, different, real, the stories and voices raw. The first piece began with the voice of a man named Hoss singing "Amazing Grace." Later, Hoss described life in the Brickyard, which Scott's narration called "this conflicted community of addicts."

Hoss: "Everybody will fuck over a friend. They allow the drug to demoralize them. They forget who they were in the heart. And forget what the basics of life were: respect thyself, respect thy neighbor, and respect thy friend."

PLAINFIELD, INDIANA, WHERE SCOTT GREW UP, IS A LONG way from the Brickyard. When Scott was a boy, Plainfield was home to about 9,000 people. "There were four hundred students in Greg's high school class," his father, Randy, said. "No minorities. One of the students had a tan." The family had moved to Plainfield from Indianapolis for the "rural environment and vastly better schools," Scott's father said. But Scott longed for the big city. He said, growing up, "I always felt like an outcast."

And for as long as Scott can remember, he has been drawn to marginalized people and outlaws—"criminal entrepreneurs" as he put it, revealing the geeky sociologist in him. Maybe he inherited his gangster love from his mother, Barbara. "She read everything she could get her hands on about serial killers," he said. When Scott was ten, he started a "detective agency." He distributed fliers up and down his street, asking potential clients, "Do you have a cheating spouse?" A neighbor called his parents. "We had to close up the agency," he said.

As a teenager, he played high school baseball for the Cascade Cadets, washed dishes at a local café, and worked at a Kroger grocery store where, in 1987, he was named bag boy of the year. Like his sister, Dawn, Scott attended the University of Southern California, where he took sociology and film classes. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1998. Back in the Midwest, he landed a research/policy job at the Illinois Attorney General's office. The feeling of being an "outcast" came roaring back. "I had to check my soul at the door too many times," he said.

Scott doesn't have that outcast feeling when he's in the Brickyard. He told me there are two places in the world he feels truly at home: the Brickyard and New Orleans. He owns a house in the Big Easy, in fact. He loves the seedy bars, the juke joints, and "the old voodoo lady down the street feeding folks out her back kitchen window at two dollars a plate." As for the Brickyard, that makeshift village of the dispossessed, Scott recalled in his radio essay the time one of the Brick-

yard regulars told him that he was "every bit the freak that they are." The man said that everybody in the Brickyard had their own thing: some smoked crack, others preferred heroin. "Your thing," the man told Scott, "is telling stories—that's cool. We need somebody to make our home movies for us, to get our lives on tape and share it with the rest of the world. Otherwise, man, we're gonna die invisible."

Scott is a family member in such good standing that he has a street name, Two-Thirty Dirty, or Two-Thirty for short. Mike-Mike, a loquacious member of the Black Souls street gang, gave Scott the name in honor of the time of morning Scott typically showed up at a gang apartment to do research and shoot dice. Scott was also always "dirty" when he showed up, Mike-Mike said, referring to his bag filled with syringes and other harm reduction equipment.

Two-Thirty wasn't Mike-Mike's first choice for Scott's street name. Initially, he christened him Big Red, a subtle slap at Scott's slight frame. But when the original Big Red came home from the joint and objected to some egghead using his name, Two-Thirty was born and no one had to die.

IN THE BRICKYARD, ONE HOT LATE SUMMER DAY, I WATCHED Scott as he filmed an interview with Jamie, a fifty-three-year-old grandmother, prostitute, and heroin addict. Jamie, who grew up in the suburbs, was illiterate until her forties, when a group of fellow addicts taught her to read from a Dick and Jane children's book. Scott's wife, Erin, handled the audio. She works with him on most of his films and is his fourth wife. He first got married at nineteen, after his freshman year of college. "That's what everybody does in Indiana," he said. He says he has finally gotten marriage right, although it still amazes him when "people who know me well ask me for relationship advice."

Scott asked Jamie, the subject of the interview, to describe herself without any reference to drugs. "A very understanding, caring person," she said. "I'm a more positive person than a negative person. I love to travel, meet people. I like to horseback ride. I believe in love."

Then he asked her what she wanted the world to know about drug addicts. "Drug addicts are human beings," Jamie said.

SCOTT SPENT THE FIRST DAYS OF THE NEW YEAR FIXING, lining up interviews in Junkieville for *Drugs Inc.* and for a project about sex workers he hopes to do for public radio. With a few minutes to kill, he sent me a short e-mail:

"I'm in the parking lot of an hourly rate motel delivering honey roasted oats cereal and a half gallon of milk to a prostitute with whom I'm trying to build rapport for an interview on sex work. BEZ series. It was her special request. Waiting for the trick to leave. This line of work isn't always glamorous eh?" **CJR**

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DON TERRY, a former reporter at the Chicago Tribune, The New York Times, and other newspapers, is a staff writer at the Chicago News Cooperative.

# The Cancer Report

*Journalists who wrote on—and through—their disease*

BY JOEL MEARES

Followers of Leroy Sievers's "My Cancer" blog knew its expected end approached when Sievers published an entry titled "The Disease Has Exploded" in June 2008. It had been a slow detonation for the former *Nightline* executive producer and war correspondent. Sievers began writing the blog for NPR in 2006, shortly after the colon cancer he overcame in 2001 resurfaced in his lungs and brain. By the time the disease "exploded," it had spread to

his ribs, shoulder blades, liver, and fractured his brittle pelvic bone. Still, he continued to write nearly every day until his death three months later; his wife, journalist Laurie Singer, often typed as he dictated in their Potomac, Maryland home. Sievers's last post, published the day before he died, was a brief note on the toy dog sitting with him in bed, his "comrade in cancer."

You might know the story. Sievers was an Emmy-winning producer before the cancer, and in the early 2000s became something of a poster boy for colonoscopies, writing frankly on *Nightline*'s daily e-mail newsletter about his first diagnosis. With the relapse, he became something of a sensation. A community of patients, families, and caregivers swelled around the NPR blog, and Sievers made multiple radio and TV appearances as his profile rose. Most famous of these was with Lance Armstrong and Elizabeth Edwards in his friend Ted Koppel's hybrid town hall/documentary project for Discov-

ery, *Living With Cancer*. Sievers would joke, "Getting cancer turned out to be a good career move for me." He suffered and died publicly, and never stopped reporting as he did.

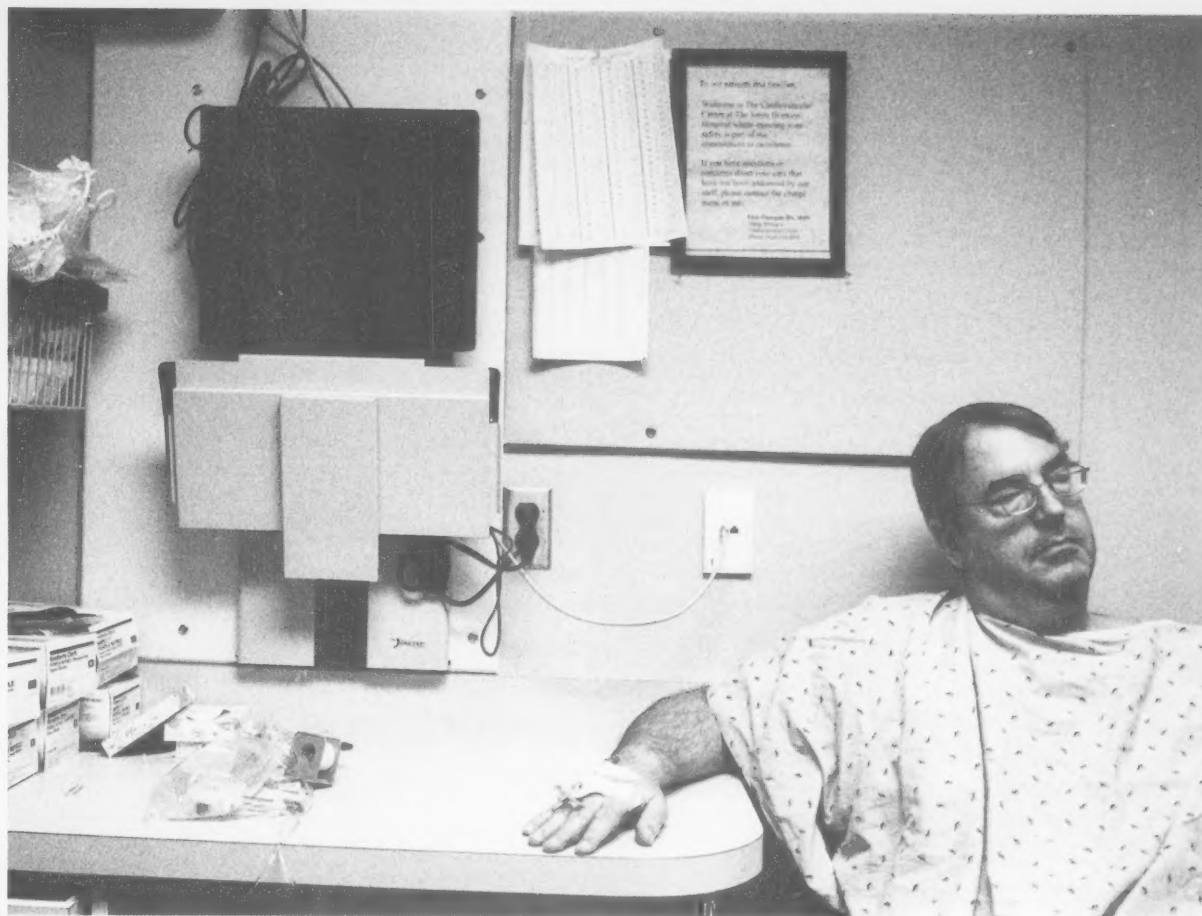
At a time when journalists increasingly turn their reporter's eye inward, Sievers was not alone in reporting about his battle with disease. A number of journalists, facing damning diagnoses, have blogged about it until their deaths, or into remission. In the United Kingdom, former *Huddersfield Times* reporter Adrian Sudbury wrote about his fight with leukemia as the "Baldy Blogger" before dying at twenty-seven, just days after Sievers. Dana Jennings, assistant editor of *The New York Times*'s Arts and Leisure section, began writing for the paper's "Well" blog after chemotherapy and a prostatectomy left him an incontinent "bazaar of scars." Kairol Rosenthal was a modern dance choreographer before her diagnosis spurred her to become a journalist, reporting daily on life as a twenty- and thirty-something with thyroid cancer. Last year, not long after Christopher Hitchens had famously written about his cancer in *Vanity Fair*, NBC online reporter Mike Celizic wrote a final entry to his sporadically updated online "Cancer Journal" before he died in September. "The words are hiding somewhere," he wrote. "But I've sworn to myself that I wasn't going to write one entry and disappear. For once, I'll get a story in without a deadline—no pun—to push me."

Patient-bloggers like these are nothing new. Google "illness x" and "blog" and you will find a web crawling with

amateur Leroy Sieverses; the Association of Cancer Resources Online has promoted a kind of blogging since 1995 with a slew of listservs categorized by cancer type. Patient-journalists are hardly news, either. Medical reporters still talk of the "Katie Couric effect"—the spike in colonoscopies following Couric's on-air test in 2000—and before her, *The Wall Street Journal*'s Laura Landro went from covering Hollywood to writing a book about her leukemia based on a "Special Report" she wrote for the *Journal* in 1996, headlined A SURVIVOR'S TALE. Former Bloomberg reporter Roger Madoff, who died at thirty-two, wrote a book about his own struggle with the disease called *Leukemia for Chickens*. The difference now is that as patient-bloggers, journalists bring their reporters' chops; and as journalists, they bring a blogger's intimate personal tone, constancy, and often, a band of followers keen to interact with the authors and each other.

Sievers's "My Cancer" blog began on radio. When his can-





**On the 'roller coaster'** Leroy Sievers at Johns Hopkins Hospital in March 2007

cer returned, he decided to focus one of his regular *Morning Edition* commentaries on his chemotherapy—it began, “My doctors are trying to kill me.” Impressed by his frankness, NPR suggested a blog (one of the outlet’s first) and a weekly podcast to go along with his broadcasts. Koppel, a close friend who spoke with Sievers daily until his death, had discussed the idea of creating a record of his experience just weeks after the cancer returned. “In Leroy, you had this extraordinary combination of a man with a wonderful sense of humor, writing skill, knowledge of the media, and a very strong man who was willing and able to undergo so many different procedures,” says Koppel. “He was uniquely placed to give a running account of what a cancer patient had to endure—the ups, the downs, what Leroy always referred to as the roller coaster.”

Sievers did not necessarily dig deep into the medical questions surrounding his treatments and prognoses. But he reported unflinchingly on his own condition, feelings, thoughts, and could fashion a helluva lede. In January 2007 he wrote:

I was sitting in the radiation waiting room yesterday morn-

ing. It was crowded. The computers had crashed earlier and everything was running way behind schedule. Everyone else there seemed to know one another; they had been getting the treatments for a while. I was the new guy, but was immediately welcomed into that instant community of cancer patients. Everyone there was older. At fifty-one, I was one of the younger patients.

And then one of the men said, “There’s a child in there.” The big, lead door had opened and he could see into the treatment room. Immediately, everything changed. The room got sort of quiet; people even lowered their voices. This was something terrible.

Joe Matazzoni, an executive producer at NPR who helped launch the blog, describes it as “a wonderful public performance of what is usually a private drama.”

“Leroy was a journalist and he brought that to his own experience with cancer,” he says. “The way he could write, in a manner that was so direct, without self-pity, and without mawkishness of any kind, and address the big issues of mortality, frankly spoke for itself.” It spoke to others, too. Sievers’s wife Singer recalls one man writing in after visit-

ing his cancer-stricken father in the hospital. Asked how he felt, the father responded, "I don't know, go read Leroy, he will tell you how I feel."

Singer says her husband approached cancer as he had war. "He covered fifteen wars and his focus was less the war itself than the death and destruction of the conflict, the life lessons that could be drawn from it. That's how he felt about the cancer. He wanted the reader to take away from what he was going through whatever they could learn about life more than death." In a *Morning Edition* commentary from November 2006, transcribed for the blog, Sievers said:

A doctor told me early on that cancer meant many people would want to talk about things I definitely didn't want to talk about. He was right. I have to talk about my body to strangers. I have to talk to my doctors about my greatest fears. I have to talk about my death. But it doesn't bother me anymore.

I don't worry as much about keeping up a facade, either. I have cried, more than I ever had before. I've been more open to friends and loved ones about how much they mean to me. Before I got sick, I would've been embarrassed to say some of those things out loud.

In the cancer wards, you see more physical displays of affection. A touch, a hand on the shoulder, some gesture meant to reassure or just let the other person know they're not alone. Cancer teaches that worrying what other people will think and being discreet is something we don't have time for.

What has happened, I think, is that we've all been humbled. Cancer has freed us to do the things we knew we should be doing all along.

The *Times*'s Dana Jennings's decision to write about his own long, cancerous brush with death came just as organically. Test results after his July 2008 prostatectomy revealed a cancer more aggressive than doctors originally thought. Struggling for a new book idea, he needed to push past the wall this diagnosis erected in his mind. Jennings enacted a professor's advice from college—write through what's blocking you—and, from November until the following October (and intermittently since then), detailed his life with cancer and the effects of the treatment on his body in weekly updates of uploaded videos and blunt, unsentimental prose on the *Times*'s "Well" blog.

He was filling a need he found after his own diagnosis, when he was unsatisfied with widely available, but dry and often technical, online writing on cancer. "I was really looking for a strong, compassionate voice," he says. "I wanted to read something where I felt like another human being was talking to me. Another human being who could write well."

His own body was his number one subject. "Almost all of the side effects are just really difficult," he says. "Guys don't want to talk about incontinence and impotence, your penis shrinking. But that stuff happens. I wanted to be honest." Jennings managed to mix humor with honesty, writing in one post: "I'm not quite what you'd call a catch. I wear manpads for intermittent incontinence...and haven't had a full erection in seven months."

In June 2009, he wrote of the side effects of hormone therapy:

When I wasn't devouring a king-size Italian sub or smoldering from a hot flash, it seemed that I was crying. The tears would usually pour down when I got ambushed by some old tune: "Sweet Baby James" and "Fire and Rain" by James Taylor, "That's the Way I've Always Heard It Should Be" by Carly Simon and, yes, "It's My Party" by Lesley Gore. Not only was I temporarily menopausal, but it appeared that I was also turning into a teenage girl from the early 1970s.

Like Jennings, Landro says an urge to honesty drove her to write about her disease for the *Journal* in the 1990s—to show readers what the doctors won't tell them: "They're not going to tell you that you're going to throw up every five minutes for the whole two weeks ahead of you.... They're not going to say that your esophagus lining is going to slide into

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**'Leroy was a journalist... he could write, in a manner that was so direct, without self-pity, and without mawkishness of any kind.'**

your stomach, and it's going to feel like fire when you swallow." More than that, Landro wanted to show readers how she used her "ability to source, to interview, and to evaluate information"—her journalist's toolbox—to navigate the health care system and to vet, in a very practical sense, everything she was being told. Cancer was like a foreign country; Landro wanted to provide a guidebook.

In her original *WSJ* piece, Landro reported that a suggested T-cell-stripping procedure was less effective than she'd been led to believe. "We learned about this not from either my hematologist or Sloan-Kettering, but by analyzing the hospital's reports of its results in medical journals and comparing them to reports from other institutions," she wrote, adding that once confronted, her "young doctor at Sloan-Kettering acknowledged that our analysis was essentially correct."

Though such investigative nuggets are rarer in the new crop of cancer blogs, readers seem to appreciate their honesty and thoughtfulness. After his first post attracted over 200 comments, Jennings said to his wife, Deb, "I feel like I'm the Beatles of prostate cancer." His most popular post, about the health problems of the family dog, Bijou, has attracted over 700 comments to date and spawned a book. "My Brief Life as a Woman," Jennings's entry about his months "aboard the Good Ship Menopause" as he underwent hormone therapy, was the *Times*'s most e-mailed story that day. Deb has been in touch with six wives of prostate cancer patients who read

Jennings's blog. She, and their son Owen, who survived non-cancerous liver failure in his senior year of high school, contributed to and were featured in the blog.

During its run, Sievers's "My Cancer" was NPR's most popular blog. Singer, his wife, remembers fellow infusion room patients telling Sievers, "I was feeling that very thing that very day you wrote it." She recalls, "Leroy would say, 'It's almost a little scary for me. Should I be guiding these people through their journey with cancer?'" The "My Cancer" community grew so large and so loyal that Singer continued to write about cancer, her time as a caregiver, and grief, after Sievers died. The blog became NPR's "Our Cancer" page in 2009 and will soon be hosted by Johns Hopkins's cancer center, where Singer serves on an advisory panel.

NEW YORK TIMES "WELL" BLOG EDITOR TARA PARKER-POPE, who published Jennings's work, says the web has changed the nature of first-person health reporting, not only creating a daily storyline for readers to follow—not unlike a TV serial—but promoting interaction with the author and among readers in comment sections. A Jennings post about bad news is moving; it becomes intimate when you can offer an immediate note of consolation—and see it responded to just as quickly. And that can serve the storytelling. "What I love about the blog is that people take your story so much beyond the original story," says Parker-Pope. Reader comments, Parker-Pope adds, can air the experiences of hundreds of readers as a print story never could.

On Sievers's "My Cancer," for instance, stories that emerged in the comments were brought into the blog. Stephanie Dornbrook, who kept her own cancer blog, "For Crying Out Loud," was a regular commenter who earned a following among other "My Cancer" commenters and was featured in Koppel's *Living With Cancer* project. Sievers included updates on her condition in his posts when her comments grew scarce, finally announcing her death in January 2008. Afterwards, Sievers posted a letter from Stephanie's husband, Dustin Dornbrook. It read: "I know she cherished this blog site and all of you were loved by her. I am grateful to Leroy for making it available. It makes me happy so many of you will keep her alive through your memories."

Despite the comfort the blogs have provided some, there are those who see potential concerns. "Personal stories and anecdotes are incredibly powerful," says Dr. Andrew Holtz, an author and medical reporter formerly with CNN's health unit. "The hazard is if the personal stories... are not representative of what the medical evidence says." In regular medical reporting, anecdotes are chosen to accompany the evidence, or a new development, or the typical experience. These blogs, Holtz says, instead illustrate the old adage that "news is whatever happens to journalists."

Holtz points to prostate cancer as a good example of where a personal blog might not reflect the medical evidence. New studies suggest that nearly all of the 200,000 cases of prostate cancer diagnosed in the United States each year are overtreated, with doctors mostly recommending the same radical prostatectomy that surgeons performed on Jennings.

A blog like Jennings's in an outlet like the *Times*—showing a man who was seemingly saved by prostatectomy—could play against this latest evidence.

Jennings was aware of the concern: "I wanted to make it clear that anything said in the posts was simply based on my own experience—I didn't want to come off as an expert except on my own case." He grappled with how he was presenting his case after learning about the rash of supposedly unnecessary prostatectomies, asking if his ride "through the stations of the prostate cancer cross" had been "all a lie? A dark conspiracy of the global medical-industrial complex?"

I'm a wild card, the 1 man in 48 saved by surgery. Without it, my doctors wouldn't have learned the cancer was so advanced, and wouldn't have given me the hormones and radiation that helped keep me alive.

...But all of this raises one last stark question: Was my life worth the 47 other prostatectomies that probably didn't have to be performed? I don't know. I'm a man, not a statistic."

That question of identity seems to be a fixation of all the writers. Would writing about cancer, becoming the face and voice of a diagnosis, forever change how they were perceived as journalists? Laura Landro knew she would be always be "that sick girl" after she wrote her *WSJ* report, but went ahead anyway to show that people could survive, and to show them how. Her cancer has relapsed three times and she is considering a follow-up to her book *Survivor*.

Jennings, on the other hand, with last year's release of *What a Difference a Dog Makes: Big Lessons on Life, Love and Healing From a Small Pooch*, and his cancer in remission, looks forward to moving on. "I don't want to be a professional cancer patient," he says.

Sievers also had some thoughts on the matter, too. Realizing the comfort and companionship he gave readers, he once told Matazzoni, the NPR producer, that "My Cancer" was the most meaningful project of his career. Koppel saw it, too. Though Sievers's spirits remained high during most of their calls—he jokingly questioned the wisdom of starting the seven-volume *Harry Potter* series—he didn't always feel like writing. "There were many times when I think he did that blog only because he knew there were people counting on him," says Koppel. "The reaction of readers was so touching and overwhelming that he thought it to be one of the major responsibilities of his life." But in June 2006, two years before his disease overtook him, and before he would come to see the impact his blog would have, he issued a journalist's call of defiance:

In the end, I may very well be best remembered as a cancer victim. That's strange to me. I don't think I like it very much. The cancer has changed just about everything. My life, my career, my body. But aside from that, I am still, at the core, the same person I was before. Maybe a little wiser, but the same person.

And so I guess this is the time to say something that I sometimes feel like shouting out loud. I hope I speak for all of you out there who have this disease when I say, "I am not my disease." We, all of us, are much much more than that. **CJR**

JOEL MEARES is an assistant editor at CJR.

# CJR Column Mentions *The Simpsons*

*A second look at SEO*

BY KAREN STABINER

In the beginning was the word—and the headline writer, who worshipped at the church of the active verb alongside the layout artist, who defined the significance of a piece based on where it sat on the page. ¶ In the end, or what seems like it to some journalists, there is search engine optimization, which redefines what matters, based on a set of Google algorithms. Simply put, if editorial aligns with Google's search priorities, if stories are written with an eye

toward the web equivalent of great placement, they have a better chance of being read. Search engine optimization—SEO to its close friends—is the process by which savvy websters customize a headline, a lede, and in perfervid cases, the text of an article, to improve its chances of appearing at the pinnacle of the Internet's Mount Everest—the top of the first screen of a Google search.

The goal is traffic, which, the theory goes, will bring advertising revenue. Part of the reason AOL was willing to pay \$315 million for The Huffington Post, for example, was HuffPo's extremely sophisticated SEO strategy, which guarantees an endless flood of traffic.

On the surface, SEO is merely as strange and suspect and inevitable as cold type was to people who knew how to read hot type upside down and backwards. But this step in the media revolution has polarized members of the fourth estate in a way that typesetting never could, because it all but erases

the line between editorial and publishing. Success—what used to be called circulation, now eyeballs—often resides in lowest-common-denominator language.

To a proponent like Jerry Monti, Technology Education Architect and Trainer at the University of California, Berkeley's Knight Digital Media Center, SEO is all about “honesty” and “transparency,” a healthy move away from often self-indulgent writing, toward a more straightforward, efficient use of language. To a self-described curmudgeon like Gene Weingarten, the *Washington Post* columnist and Pulitzer Prize winner, it's “the journalistic equivalent of a self-administered prefrontal lobotomy.”

The one thing they seem to agree on is that, for better or worse, the era of the clever headline and an above-the-fold mentality is over. Puns and double entendre and the significance of the far left-hand column on the first page have been consigned to the dustbin of journalistic history, as out of date as even the 1974 remake of *The Front Page*.

The question for resisters is how to work the machine—and that's what its supporters call the SEO-Google combine, The Machine—so that The Machine doesn't work them.

WHEN SEO IS GOOD, IT'S VERY, VERY good, according to those who embrace the technology. It is a great equalizer, delivering information created by any writer willing to learn the rules of the new game to any reader—sorry, *user*—who types in the proper key words for a Google search. Dorian Benkoil, jour-

nalist turned founder of Teeming Media, a New York-based digital media consultancy, thinks that those of us who draw breath actually have a lot in common with Google, in terms of our information needs, and that SEO is here to satisfy us both.

“Generally speaking, what's best for human beings, to find and understand something on the web, is what's best for the machine,” said Benkoil. “A lot of people will come across what you're offering via a short link and perhaps a snippet of text. If that headline is cutesy or elliptical or hard to understand, and somebody doesn't know what he's going to get, he's less likely to click. If it's straightforward and honest about what it's about, they're likelier to click. And that's the same for SEO.”

Monti thinks SEO may be the only thing standing between a story and Internet oblivion, and rejects the idea that it diminishes stories in any way. In fact, he thinks SEO encourages a welcome, reader-friendly mindset among writers and editors. “Most news stories are destined to be fishwrap,” he



said, "so they're not going to be great literature. If it's traditional news, five Ws stuff, you certainly want to focus on SEO—key words in your hed and lede, make it easily scannable for readers, short paragraphs, bulleted lists, seventeen-word sentences, subheads.

"There's so much research on what sentence length people easily parse," he noted. "My research shows that at much longer than seventeen words, it drops off."

The *Post*'s Weingarten, who last summer wrote a column headlined "Gene Weingarten column mentions Lady Gaga" as an indictment of SEO, is having none of it. When SEO is bad it's horrid, as far as he is concerned, and that's pretty much all of the time. He agrees that SEO encourages a certain SEO mindset, one he characterizes in a somewhat less flattering light.

"SEO is all part of a general degradation of our culture, in which we have replaced spontaneity with script, at the expense of growth," he said. "It's an extension of our MP3 culture, where we no longer seek surprise. We listen to music we already know. Same with SEO. People find only what they are looking for. They are denied the sort of surprise a newspaper page delivers."

But surprise doesn't hold a lot of currency in new media,

where "consistency over time" is what moves a website or blogger up the Google rankings, according to Benkoil. "Good content that appeals, applies, and attracts attention" is what counts, he said, "and on the web that translates to links in, and to authority."

Harry Shearer, who uses "humorist" as a catch-all for a career that includes documentary filmmaking, frequent blogging for The Huffington Post, and a long-running radio show, is not as apoplectic as Weingarten. But his concerns are no less universal. SEO recognizes more than key words; it knows—and ranks—the web profile of the site where those words come from, based on prominence and traffic track record. And that, according to Shearer, turns coverage into something like a prom queen competition.

"I'm much more concerned about story selection being directed by Google rankings and hit counts than I am about the cleverness/information quotient of a headline," he said. "That's where the danger is—if you use popularity in any form, surveys or hit counts, for what stories you run, that leads to a universe where we're in two wars and two economic crises and what you see or read is basically about celebrities and political yelling. And that's because celebrities pull ratings and hit counts everywhere, and political yelling pulls ratings on TV."



SEO EXPERTS SEEM TO PREFER NOT TO ENGAGE IN HEATED debate; they'd rather instruct. Monti cites Google's Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide, a low-key how-to guide, as proof that SEO is all about enhancement and ease of function, kind of the Internet equivalent of an automatic trans-

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## 'Yes, I do believe I am experiencing an orgasm. Why yes, I am.'

mission. That's where you'll find a little cartoon guy named Googlebot, who looks like a teenage descendant of the Tin Man and carries a peace-love-and-understanding bouquet of flowers in his/its hand. He's "crawling content for Google's index, every day, every night, nonstop." All we have to do to get his attention is follow the rules.

If everyone obeyed rules, though, we would have no need for police officers or PIN numbers. Excess abounds in SEO's shiny-new-toy phase, from the binge notion that if some is good, more is better, to downright premeditated abuse, sometimes called "black-hat" SEO. *The New York Times* recently ran a story about dubious business practices at an online eyeglass boutique, whose owner flatly stated that he welcomed negative online reviews from disgruntled customers because even bad news helped to drive his site to the top of the charts, SEO-wise. His big mistake seems to have been that he allegedly threatened a customer who complained, which optimized a police search: eight days later the man was charged with one count each of mail fraud, wire fraud, making interstate threats, and cyberstalking.

There are no equivalent penalties for journalists, at least not for the SEO maneuvering part, though both Benkoil and Monti say that Googlebot and the humans at Google who monitor bot behavior will sniff out manipulators and punish them by dropping their rankings. For journalists, the challenge is to avoid seductive excess—to stick with the Google guidelines and not change every noun to a word that performs better. It's not an easy discipline. Shearer clicked when he saw a tweet with the headline, "Photographing Julian Assange," only to find what he called a "stupid video" of a photographer trying to find the man behind WikiLeaks prior to his arrest.

Benkoil bristles at that kind of gaming, and at Weingarten's tongue-in-cheek Lady Gaga headline—at any attempt to grab a reader with what he thinks are misleading SEO tactics. "What you're talking about is a bait and switch," he said. "If somebody's searching for Lady Gaga and they click on this *Washington Post* story, are they going to be happy or ticked off?"

"The classic old *New York Post* headline, HEADLESS BODY IN TOPLESS BAR," he continues. "If I click on that page and there's a story about something other than a headless body in

a topless bar, I'm going to be pissed off." Monti agrees: "If lying is your professional strategy it's time to look for another job."

Weingarten is not interested in an SEO etiquette lesson. As far as he's concerned, the online Lady Gaga headline isn't a lie but a call to action. (The headline in the print version, where SEO holds no sway, was the search-worthy but sly, "A Digital Salute to Online Journalism.")

Weingarten's larger fear is that chasing the algorithm will erase the creativity that distinguishes us from the Googlebot. "We'll all start talking literally, like SEO headlines. Subtlety will disappear forever. Sterility will be our lingua franca, even among lovers. Molly Bloom's famous soliloquy," he said, referring to the lengthy SEO-averse passage in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, about her thoughts while making love, "would become this: 'Yes, I do believe I am experiencing an orgasm. Why yes, I am. And I am enjoying it.'"

ANJALI MULLANY, THE SOCIAL-MEDIA MANAGER FOR THE *New York Daily News*, has a contrasting and rather blunt perspective on the good old days, which is that they weren't as different, or as good, as we might think.

"This is not a new debate," she said. "Big news organizations have always been concerned with circulation, ratings, viewership. They've always made decisions based on what is going to make them money. That said, the audience has infinite choices on the Internet. If you're concerned about traffic, you should also value publishing high-quality content on your website. I suppose that includes headlines that are both smart and SEO-conscious."

"As long as websites depend on traffic-driven advertising revenue in order to sustain themselves, and as long as Google and other search engines continue to drive traffic to media websites, SEO will continue to be emphasized."

Shearer hopes that we end up with a two-tiered system, a digital version of The Associated Press breaking-news stories, on the one hand, and longer features that don't engage in SEO-ery, on the other. And he's reluctant to join in the machine-bashing: in the great chicken-and-egg debate about web user habits, Shearer thinks that user attention spans are what drive search-friendly journalism, not the other way around.

"I don't think it's a machine imperative," he said. "I think it's a people imperative. The impulse now is, 'We don't have time for that.' Maybe in a slower day we would've had time for a headline where we have to think, 'Oh, I see. That's what they really meant.' But with the rush of information, there's nothing anti-human with saying that simple is better."

As the closest thing to a SEO peacemaker I found, Shearer gets the final, crossing-the-aisle word, contributing two more of his résumé entries in the hope of increasing readership: "Wait. Don't call me a humorist. Mention *The Simpsons* and *Spinal Tap*," he said, as he does multiple voices for the television show and was the bassist Derek Smalls in the classic mockumentary. "It's better for SEO." **CJR**

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KAREN STABINER is writing a book about restaurant staff meals with chef Michael Romano. She is an adjunct professor at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism.

# Parking lot floods when man bursts

*The Herald-Sun, Durham, N.C. 02/04/94*

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A vertical black and white photograph on the left side of the page. It shows a close-up of a door handle and a person's arm, possibly holding a book or a folder, with some papers visible. The image is somewhat blurry and has a high-contrast, grainy quality.

# Ideas + Reviews

SECOND READ

## Not for Laughs

*A pathbreaking look at the dark comic genius behind Skippy*

BY DAVID HAJDU

“All cartoonists are geniuses,” wrote John Updike in his introduction to a collection of cartoons by Arnold Roth, a specialist in zany quasi-doodles popular in the late fifties and early sixties. Updike, who had wanted to be a cartoonist before he thought of writing, declined to mollify non-believers by explaining the comment. He knew it to be true from a lifetime of studying newspaper comics and comic books like sacred texts. As he recalled in an autobiographical essay published in his 1999 nonfiction collection, *More Matter*, “I loved cartoons—almost any cartoon that met a modest standard of professional finish—and studied them as if my salvation lay somewhere in their particulars of shading and penmanship.”

Updike got his education in comics from the comics, like everyone who took the funny pages seriously before the fairly recent emergence of cartoon studies as a scholarly discipline; and I began my education in comics by reading Updike on the subject. Thanks to Updike, I started to look at familiar comics for things I had not been equipped to notice before, and I wanted to know more about all those unfamiliar names he tossed off, like Fontaine Fox, who drew a strip called “Toonerville Folks,” and Percy Crosby, who did one called “Skippy,” which I remembered only vaguely as the source of a movie I had seen in a class at New York University.

Today, of course, a newcomer to anything can look up everything instantly, and students of comics in particular can draw upon a vast and growing body of serious literature published on the topic. In a tall bookcase in my own office, there are more than 200 books on comics and cartooning, with a whole shelf dedicated to biographies and memoirs of comics artists and writers, from early innovators like George Herriman (“Krazy Kat”) and Winsor McCay (“Little Nemo in Slumberland”) to creators of comic-book superheroes such as Stan Lee and Jack Kirby (Marvel), Carmine Infantino (DC), and many, many more. This is the boom time of comics biography (as opposed to the “pow” and “kaboom” time), a time that seems to take as a given that all cartoonists are geniuses.

The urtext of this phenomenon, the book that established the model for most of the biographies of comics artists published in recent years, is *Skippy and Percy Crosby: The Life and Work of a Great American Cartoonist*, by Jerry Robinson, a journalism student turned cartoonist turned cartoon historian. Now eighty-nine and still active as a cartoon curator, speaker, and writer, Robinson himself recently became the subject of a biography modeled on his book about Skippy and Crosby: *Jerry Robinson: Ambassador of Comics*, by N. C. Christopher Couch, writing in collaboration with Robinson. *Skippy and Percy Crosby*, published by Holt, Rinehart

and Winston in 1978, has been out of print for decades, unfortunately. Writers on comics (and writers of comics) still prize it as a primary work, and its mix of fast-moving biography and fanboy awe, heavily peppered with samples of art, has become the formula for the form.

About ten years ago, I began researching my own book of comics history, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*. In preparation, I asked some of the artists I was interviewing to recommend readings, and Will Eisner mailed me a copy of Robinson's book on Percy Crosby. "This was done very well," Eisner wrote in a note he slipped inside the book. "I wouldn't mind if a good writer did something like this about me." Eisner, proud of both his work and the esteem it earned him during his lifetime, understood the value of biography in cementing the legacy of an artist.

BORN AROUND THE SAME TIME AS THE American comic strip, in 1891, Crosby grew up in a day when newspaper comics were titillating the emerging mass audience for popular entertainment. Unruly, manic, crude, and hostile to propriety, the era's cartoons captured American popular culture being born, and, nickel by nickel into the millions, they funded the news empires of both Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. When Crosby was a child in New York, the most popular comic strips in America—"The Yellow Kid," "Happy Hooligan," "The Katzenjammer Kids," "Little Jimmy"—centered on the lives of kids growing up in the over-packed, chaotic, scary urban centers of the Northeast. (Few of the strips' locations

were explicitly named, although they all looked like New York City; in fact, most of the comics seemed to take place on a single block of tenements in the Lower East Side.) In the vernacular idiom of cartoon burlesque, the Sunday funnies dealt with the young problems of a new America.

Crosby, like a great many cartoonists then and now, started precociously. At sixteen, he found work in the art department of *The Delineator*, a women's magazine—or a "Journal of Fashion, Culture, and Fine Arts"—edited by Theodore Dreiser. He was versatile and, in the early years of his career, malleable. By seventeen, he was working as a political cartoonist, at first for the *New York Evening Call*, a Socialist broadsheet for which he once did an effectively grim cartoon about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory disaster (reprinted in Robinson's book). He showed interest in combining ideology and humor, an inclination that grew with the years in ever-stranger ways. Crosby worked up samples of two politically skewed humor cartoons, "Biff" and "The Extreme Brothers—Laff and Sy," and the *Call* published them until readers complained about their frivolousness. Crosby, describing his disappointment in one of several books he published years later, said, "Communists absolutely have no sense of humor, and they positively dread ridicule."

He bounced around New York publications, ascending with each bounce, till he landed, at age nineteen, at Pulitzer's *New York World*, where he worked as a beat artist—a reporter who filed narrative drawings of news events, something of a precursor to today's visual journalists. Assigned to the Metropolitan sec-

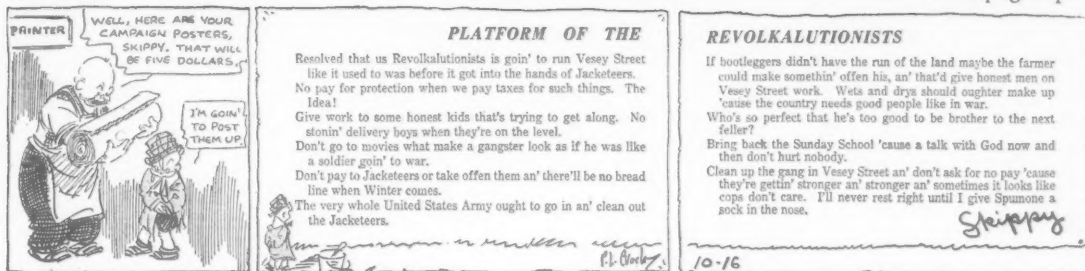
tion of the Sunday edition, Crosby covered New York politics and crime for a couple of years, then bounced some more among newspapers and magazines (with a stint in the Army during the First World War) until he ended up at *Life* magazine, producing wry cartoons of social commentary as well as more conventional domestic humor. It was at *Life* that Crosby developed Skippy.

A boy of five or six who sometimes looked younger and almost always acted older, Skippy was an unprecedented comic-book kid—neither a hooligan nor very happy most of the time. He is no urchin; Crosby dressed him like a little fop in a high-collared shirt, a polka-dot bow tie, and a waistcoat that dangled nearly to his crunched-up socks. Skippy has empty ovals for eyes and, in most of Crosby's drawings, no mouth. His face is almost expressionless, like Buster Keaton's, and, as with Keaton, the surface blankness leads one to imagine Skippy as endlessly complex inside.

He is a solitary character, often depicted sitting on the curb or leaning on a fence by himself; and, even when he is doing something with his friends in the strip's small group of recurring characters, he is always alone in his point of view, the only one to grasp or to challenge the situation at hand. The backgrounds in the strip are minimal—sometimes just plain white space without so much as a suggestion of setting. Skippy occupies a space not abstracted, in the manner of the desert-mirage dreamscapes of Herriman's "Krazy Kat," but *subtracted*. He lives nowhere in particular but in his head, and his lonesomeness is the deep source of Skippy's veracity. Childhood is a lonesome time, as former

**A worm turns** Skippy, always mildly philosophical, grew more political.





**Retail politics** The strip became little more than a forum for Crosby's ideological jumble.

children often forget. The loneliest kid in the comics, Skippy was also the realest one until Charlie Brown.

Indeed, Skippy was the first realistic, believable child in the comic strips, as Robinson points out early in his book. "The brilliance of Skippy," Robinson argues, "was that here was a fantasy with a realistic base, the first kid cartoon with a definable and complex personality grounded in daily life." Skippy is invariably occupied, to the low degree that he is occupied by anything, by the everyday matters in a young person's life—working a gumball machine, bringing home his report card, avoiding a bath.

As I mentioned, I had seen the 1931 live-action *Skippy* movie in a film-history class session on child actors, and I had found it sweet and gently humorous; Jackie Cooper, at age nine, was nominated for an Oscar for Best Actor for his performance in the title role. Until I read Jerry Robinson's book, though, I had not realized that the film, just like all the movies made from comic books in recent years, was only one element in a multi-platform franchise that predated those buzzwords by half a century. Once Crosby moved "Skippy" from *Life* magazine into newspaper syndication in 1925, it reached millions of readers in hundreds of newspapers around the United States. There was a Skippy radio show; novels about Skippy written by Crosby; a popular song about Skippy ("You can always see him in the daily papers/you'll love his capers"); Skippy dolls; Skippy trading cards; Skippy jigsaw puzzles; a Skippy wagon; a Skippy sled; and Skippy eyeglass frames (complete with a sticker certifying, "This case contains a pair of genuine 'Skippy'

glasses," despite the fact that Skippy didn't wear glasses).

Crosby got rich and traveled in high company, lunching with Jerome Kern and John Barrymore, palling around with Robert Benchley and Harold Ross. He took to strolling with a Malacca walking stick, in a derby. He became a celebrated fixture in Manhattan nightlife. He drank too much. As *Newsweek* once reported, Crosby went out one night for a round of visits to New York hotspots, and he could not explain the next day how he ended up in a railroad yard in Cleveland. Before long, Crosby swore off alcohol and settled with his second family in an eighteen-room fieldstone mansion on 200 acres in Virginia, and that is where he was living when he proceeded to undo everything he had accomplished, spiraling in a diminuendo that gives his story one of the strangest last acts in American pop culture history. That is to say, he was ideal to be the first subject of a comic-artist biography; his life (tragedy) is as compelling as his work (comedy).

IN 1939, WHEN JERRY ROBINSON WAS A student at Columbia's journalism school, he lived in a rented room with a family in the Bronx. The family knew a would-be artist in the neighborhood, Bob Kahn, who, under the pen name Kane, was developing a new comic-book character called The Bat-Man. It was barely a year since Superman had first appeared and almost instantaneously made the new cartoon format, the comic book, wildly popular among young people, if not their parents. Robinson's landlords, knowing their boarder was interested in cartooning and could draw as well as write, helped him get a part-time job as an as-

sistant to Kane, and Robinson proved useful, suggesting that The Bat-Man take on a boy partner, whom Robinson recommended calling Robin. Another day, Robinson brought Kane a playing card, a joker, and persuaded him to create a villain based on it.

At the time, comic books were to newspaper strips what journalism was to literature: a kindred art commonly seen as something lesser, simpler, less sophisticated. In the world of cartooning, provenance in newsprint had an elevating effect; in the world of prose, its effect was diminishing. Robinson started his adult life on the disreputable sides of two pairs of tracks, and he came eventually to see writing historical books on newspaper cartooning as a way to jump both sets of rails at once. While others had written articles on cartoons of all sorts, few writers were doing full-scale, grown-up, hardcover books on comics; Robinson, moreover, would fix his focus on newspaper strips, the more reputable of the two spheres of cartooning.

There had been serious writing on comic strips—or writing of varying quality by serious people—since the earliest days of newspaper funnies. Much of the first journalism on the strips, by people such as Ralph Bergengren and Sidney Fairfield, was severely critical—attacks on the slangy, rough-edged, highly visual form of mass entertainment by defenders of the genteel tradition. By the Jazz Age, critics disposed to modernism, such as Gilbert Seldes, editor of *The Dial* (and first publisher of "The Waste Land" in the US) saw a kind of democratic radicalism in the idiosyncrasy of strips like "Krazy Kat," and intellectuals on the whole warmed up to the funnies. By the

1960s, a sizable body of serious essays and short works of criticism on comics had been published, the best of them collected by the editors David Manning White and Robert H. Abel in the 1963 anthology *The Funnies: An American Idiom*. This was the environment Robinson entered in 1974, when he published his first book, *The Comics: An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art*, a heavily illustrated overview of newspaper-strip history, written under the aegis of the Newspaper Comics Council, an organization of cartoonists protective of their legacy. (The group held the copyright to *The Comics*.) While researching this book, Robinson developed an interest in Percy Crosby.

*Skippy and Percy Crosby* is, by design, a work of popular history, not an academic study. After all, Robinson is a journalist by training, a cartoonist by vocation, and a historian by aspiration. Besides, even if Robinson (or anyone other than a well-established historian) had been fully equipped and determined to write a dense, scholarly study of Crosby's life and work, there is no reason to think any publisher would have wanted it. Robinson's book, an authoritative but readable and somewhat boosterish short biography, was the book appropriate to its time, the book necessary to make possible longer, more penetrating biographies of comics artists.

Affectionate but not fawning, the book positions Crosby with precision in comics history. Robinson, who researched Crosby well and understands cartoons, does particularly well at the trickiest part of biography: illuminating the work through the life. (The opposite is easier.) Drawing from Crosby's autobiographical writings, Robinson traces his subject's mercurial association with organized religion, and relates it to a cartoon in which Skippy is asked what church he attends. Skippy answers, "I go to God direct." Crosby, plagued by mental illness that overtook him in the end, left early hints of his trouble in word balloons. As Skippy says in one strip, "I ain't myself, I wonder if I'm goin' screwy. For no reason at all, I catch myself feelin' happy—an' it's all I can do to steer my mind back into things that worry me."

Crosby began unraveling in the funny pages and then moved to the news sec-

**Skippy was a boy of five or six who sometimes looked younger and almost always acted older.**

tions of the paper, and, finally, the pages of books he published himself. Skippy, always mildly philosophical, grew more political and less mild, until the strip became little more than a forum for Crosby's increasingly zealous ideological jumble of conservatism, anti-intellectualism, and isolationism. In one strip, Skippy and a friend, a little girl, walk and talk together. "What's all this Pan American stuff I see in the papers?" asked the girl, who looks no older than three or four. "The Pan America stuff start off 'n Vesey Street by your belittlin'," says Skippy, "an now it's takin' aviators an' warships to press out the wrinkles."

The girl responds, "Congress can't bluff me."

As they walk away, their backs now to the reader, Skippy concludes, "The map o' the United States is like an open hand, ready to shake with South America; But it's guys just like you that's tryin' to make a fist out of it."

In addition to writing and drawing the Skippy strip, Crosby wrote several books based on the character, and they grew increasingly ruminative, political, and odd. After the first Skippy novel for young readers, Crosby wrote *Dear Sooky*, a collection of letters from Skippy to a dead little friend of his in heaven. Its follow-up, *Skippy Rambles*, was a collection of short essays of political and social comment written in an erratic voice, part Crosby, part Skippy, part speaking in tongues. With his next book, *A Cartoonist's Philosophy*, Crosby largely abandoned Skippy and rambled, for the most part incoherently, about economics, religion, politics, racketeering, and taxes. Since no publisher would take the book, Crosby had it printed himself. In a typical section, Crosby writes:

I believe that it is the Divine Will that the whole structure will eventually

crash, because it has been erected on a foundation of hypocrisy and greed. Out of the chaos the real leaders will rise; leaders who are not interested in wealth nor political power, but who have been ordained by a higher power to lift humanity from discord to the realms of harmony. Then a new race will be born to the world, here in America, and their worship of God will be built on science and philosophy through the great corridors of Universal Brotherhood.

More self-published books and pamphlets followed through the late thirties, all of them dealing in part with Crosby's conviction that Franklin Roosevelt, in conspiracy with Stalin, was transforming the United States into a totalitarian Socialist state. Crosby submitted article-length versions of his ramblings to the major newspapers (including *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Herald*, and *The New York Times*); when they were rejected, he paid to have them published in the same papers as full-page and double-spread ads. As Robinson reported in his book, Crosby spent more than \$30,000 on these advertisements in a single year.

Crosby lost his syndication contract for "Skippy" in 1945. Four years later, after a failed suicide attempt, he was taken to Bellevue, then transferred for long-term care to the psychiatric ward at Kings Park Veterans' Hospital on Long Island, where he remained until he died, on his seventy-third birthday, in 1964. What happened to Crosby? Robinson, struggling in the last pages of his book to come to terms with Crosby's decline, found an easy answer: "genius is an enigma." **CJR**

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## BOOK REVIEW

# The Selfish Bit

*Do we rule information, or does it rule us?*

BY DAVID SHENK

IN 1848, ON A TOUR OF EUROPE, RALPH Waldo Emerson met, and was taken with, the restless English mathematician and inventor Charles Babbage. He learned of Babbage's ambitious plans for his "Difference Engine" calculating device and its symbolic processing successor, the "Analytical Engine." These were enormous and intricate machines—or, rather, plans for such—requiring innumerable customized gears and pins that, when fit together, would perform fantastic calculations at an inhuman pace. While neither machine could actually be built in Babbage's era, their conception uncannily anticipated the creation of digital computers a century later. In 1870, a year before Babbage died, Emerson wrote of Babbage's work and its import: "Steam is an apt scholar and a strong-shouldered fellow, but has not yet done all its work.... It is yet coming to render many higher services of a mechanico-intellectual kind."

*Higher services of a mechanico-intellectual kind.* It's a gorgeous phrase, partly because it hints at the nebulous space between what Emerson could see and what he could not even hope to see. This strange gap points to the first of three grand ideas in James Gleick's important new book, *The Information*. It is reasonably easy to look back in human history and learn how a string of visionaries laid the groundwork for discoveries that made possible future innovation. But, as Gleick reminds us, it is much harder for us to understand how their pre-innovation minds actually worked. As he writes, "Every new medium transforms the nature of human thought."

This is far from a shocking notion in 2011, but what Gleick does in this book, over and over again to a remarkably satisfying degree, is show exactly how it is true. How did the written word actually mark the beginning of logic and consciousness (and what was it like to think before logic existed)? How could the telegraph radically shift perceptions of time, space, and weather (and how did people consider the world before they had a sense of connectedness to other regions)? The book begins in the pre-literate age and marches through the most significant information technology leaps, helping us view each age through its pre-discovery prism.

Gleick devotes a fair amount of space to Babbage not simply because his is a pow-

erful story of curiosity and perseverance, but also because of Babbage's almost incomprehensible place in the time-idea continuum. He was so far ahead of his own era that he couldn't possibly understand the greater implications of his ideas. (Nor, of course, could anyone else: the English government terminated its support for the Difference Engine after ten years because it saw no potential use for the device.) "Babbage's interests," Gleick writes, "straying so far from mathematics, seeming so miscellaneous, did possess a common thread that neither he nor his contemporaries could perceive. His obsessions belonged to no category—that is, no category yet existing. His true subject was information: messaging, encoding, processing."

There are dozens of such observations in this book, some of which are undoubtedly not original to Gleick but all of which he conveys with exceptional clarity and economy. Indeed, when collected together into this coherent historical narrative, they do feel "revelatory," as his publisher claims. (Disclosure: Both Gleick's publisher, Pantheon, and my publisher, Doubleday, are imprints of Knopf.) They give you a sweeping sense of how much the world has changed, not just in the tools we use and the toys we play with, but in how we think. Gleick is wrestling with truly profound material, and so will the reader. This is not a book you will race through on a single plane trip. It is a slow, satisfying meal.

Who will make the time? Who will actually read the whole thing? I don't mean this as a knock on Gleick; he's a pleasure to read. But as he himself notes in an earlier book, *Faster*, we have become a "multitasking, channel-flipping, fast-forwarding citizenry." Having built a civilization on precise data and big ideas, we now whirl so quickly through it that even serious minds show less patience for the slow, the uninterrupted, the long-form. (Even two-paragraph e-mails these days seem to qualify as long-form; I am astounded by the number of intellectuals who regularly fail to read anything beyond the first sentence or two of e-mails they receive. Even for them, the thrill of keeping up with information too often replaces the satisfaction of experiencing it.) We also show signs of splintering ourselves into hope-

**The Information:  
A History, a Theory, a Flood**  
By James Gleick  
Pantheon Books  
544 pages, \$29.95

lessly specialized info-spheres. To my chagrin, Gleick doesn't dwell on speed or fragmentation in this book, though he does review the history and meaning of information glut at some length.

Gleick's second big idea in *The Information* is that "information is what our world runs on: the blood and the fuel, the vital principle." This might at first seem either grandiose or utterly mundane, depending on how closely you've followed the musings of the "digerati," but here it is conveyed as a substantial idea. We're all used to referring to data as a conduit for more vital elements—biology, music, ideas, and so on. Gleick takes pains to convince us that the data is not just the vehicle, but also the underlying element itself. He writes:

Where is Beethoven's Piano Sonata in E minor? Is it in the original handwritten score? The printed sheet music? Any one performance—or perhaps the sum of all performances, historical and potential, real and imagined?

The quavers and crotchets inked on paper are not the music. Music is not a series of pressure waves sounding through the air; nor grooves etched in vinyl or pits burned in CDs; nor even the neuronal symphonies stirred up in the brain of the listener. The music is the information.

So it goes throughout the book, with Gleick painting information as the core of, well, everything. "The whole universe," he writes, "is thus seen as a computer—a cosmic information-processing machine." It is a powerful idea, but also slightly oppressive in Gleick's unwavering formulation. For it would be just as valid to say that music exists *only* in the living experience of the listener, or the shared experience of a group, or that it can be defined *only* as a collective journey from the mind of the composer through bits and eyes and ink and air and circuits and neurons. To say that music, or anything, can be reduced utterly to information doesn't feel right to me. (I say this with humility, rejecting the imperious book review model where the reviewer's off-the-cuff reaction is positioned as superior to the author's long-considered work.)

I offer the same hesitancy in response to Gleick's third and final major theme, his even more ambitious proposal that

information is an independent organism. This is, as far as I can tell, not meant as a metaphor or a thought exercise. He means it literally. Information exists independently of the corporeal forces that use it and act upon it. It has its own agency. "In the long run," Gleick writes, "history is the story of information becoming aware of itself." In this formulation, information is not a mere tool of humans, but its own autonomous force—the "infosphere" as distinguished from the biosphere.

Most of the biosphere cannot see the infosphere; it is invisible, a parallel universe humming with ghostly inhabitants. But they are not ghosts to us—not anymore. ... We are aware of the many species of information. We name their types sardonically, as though to reassure ourselves that we understand: *urban myths* and *zombie lies*. We keep them alive in air-conditioned server farms. But we cannot own them. When a jingle lingers in our ears, or a fad turns fashion upside down, or a hoax dominates the global chatter for months and vanishes as swiftly as it came, who is master and who is slave?

This is one of those ideas that cannot sound like anything other than wild exaggeration when first encountered, but which slowly takes root in the reader's consciousness under Gleick's deft hand. The idea clearly extends directly from Richard Dawkins's notion that genes serve themselves rather than their living hosts. One way to understand Gleick's book is as a successor and companion to Dawkins's 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Gleick quotes Dawkins:

[A gene] is no more likely to die when it is a million years old than when it is only a hundred. It leaps from body to body down the generations, manipulating body after body in its own way and for its own ends, abandoning a succession of mortal bodies before they sink in senility and death.

By the same token, argues Gleick, we can see that all of information is trying to replicate itself, and using our world merely as a host. He quotes philosopher Daniel Dennett, who quips, "A scholar is just a library's way of making another library."

I only wish Gleick would take one baby step back from his total embrace of autonomy and causality. Genes are an interesting case study here. In his chapter on genes, he conveys an awful lot of the complexity very well, explaining, for example, that there can't be any such thing as a "gene for" any particular trait because genes interact with other genes. ("There is no gene for long legs; there is no gene for a leg at all. To build a leg requires many genes, each issuing instructions in the form of proteins, some making raw materials, some making timers and on-off switches.") But then he lapses, omitting the critical factor of gene-environment interaction, or what is now commonly referred to as epigenetics. Thus it's not quite true when he insists, "The genetic message is independent and impenetrable: no information from events outside can change it." DNA is stable, but epigenetic signals will impact a gene's message. A trait will emerge, as McGill University's Michael Meaney writes, "only from the interaction of gene and environment." (This genetic critique I offer with less humility, as it is the subject of my own recent book.)

Of course, it is possible to contain both genetics and the environment within Gleick's infosphere paradigm: environmental signals are information too, even if they aren't seen as clearly as DNA. But my small pushback against Gleick is that he's not just being somewhat gene-centric; he's also set on depicting a world as filled with conscious, deterministic forces, while it might be better understood as being a creature of interaction. Just as a marriage only exists in the space between the two people, and humor exists only in the interaction between humorist and audience, it seems to me that genes and information are not any more in charge of our world than rabbits or carrots or carbon dioxide levels. The infosphere seems more interesting when seen neither as a mere tool of sentient beings nor as an omniscient, omnipotent being itself. There is no master and there is no slave. We're all in this together. **CJR**

DAVID SHENK is the author of six books, including *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut* and, most recently, *The Genius in All of Us: New Insights Into Genetics, Talent, and IQ*. He lives in Brooklyn.

## BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

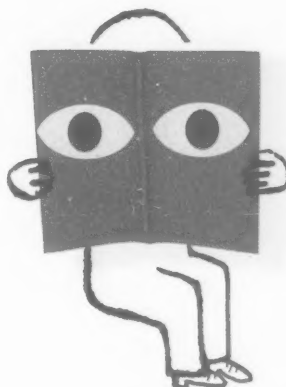
BY JAMES BOYLAN

### This Is NPR:

#### The First Forty Years

By Cokie Roberts and others  
Chronicle Books  
271 pages  
\$29.95

THIS GLOSSY HEAVYWEIGHT volume commemorates the fortieth anniversary of the arrival of National Public Radio, which went on the air in April 1971. It is probably closest in approach to a college yearbook—self-congratulatory, chummy, and a little disjointed. The book offers a kind of history of NPR, but cut into so many snippets that it is hard to tell sometimes who wrote a particular page. Worse, events have passed it by. The veteran news chief so prominent in these pages has resigned, a victim of her much-discussed firing of the commentator Juan Williams for something he said on another network. Indeed, there seems to be a political chill in the air for NPR. But, as these accounts make clear, the network has always found ways to survive and thrive. Starting small, it now reaches an audience of 27 million, who listen to 910 stations. Moreover, only a fraction of NPR's support now comes, even indirectly, from government. Its amiability, dependability, intelligence, and courage are suggested in the articles by such veterans as Cokie Roberts, Susan Stamberg, Noah Adams, John Ydstie, Renée Montagne, and Ari Shapiro, and in cameos by many others. There is also an enclosed CD with



a brief selection of notable broadcasts, including the debut of *All Things Considered* with its coverage from the street of the massive antiwar demonstration in Washington on May 5, 1971.

#### Denys Wortman's New York:

#### Portrait of the City in the 1930s and 1940s

Edited by James Sturm and  
Brandon Elston  
Introduction by Robert W. Snyder  
Drawn & Quarterly  
288 pages  
\$29.95 paperbound

IN 1924, DENYS WORTSMAN (1887–1958) took over a single-panel feature in the *New York World* called “Metropolitan Movies.” Each drawing was a vignette of life in New York City; the captions were wry or pointed, never jokes. Sometimes the figures were adapted from photographs his wife took on the streets. After the *World* closed in 1931, Wortman continued drawing for its successors and, later, syndicates. Altogether, he produced more than 9,000 drawings,

of which 5,100 are now archived at the Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, Vermont. Thanks in part to the work of his son, Denys Wortman VIII, Wortman is receiving attention as an artist, a descendant of the Ashcan School. His drawings have recently been exhibited at the

Museum of the City of New York, and this collection offers 287 of them. Many deal gently with the rigors of the Great Depression; among the most poignant is one showing a mother resting her head on a tenement kitchen table; her young daughter says, “Don’t cry, be little, and I’ll be your mother.”

#### News to Me:

#### Adventures of an Accidental Journalist

By Laurie Hertzell  
University of Minnesota Press  
206 pages  
\$22.95

IN THIS EQUABLE MEMOIR, Laurie Hertzell looks back to her youth (well, she isn’t that old) as a neophyte newspaperwoman at the *Duluth News-Tribune* on frigid Lake Superior in Minnesota. Still a teenager, she started in 1976 as a clerk, then moved on to the copy desk, and ultimately became a full-fledged regional reporter. She makes it all sound wide-eyed and inadvertent, and her personal rise is winningly

told. But she also tells a story that recapitulates much of what happened to the American press at the start of its long decline. A medium-sized newspaper in a medium-sized city, the century-old *News-Tribune* in the 1970s was entering an era of change. Hertzell was interviewed by a batch of “quivery old men,” but when she went to work she found the newsroom’s energy was focused in four recently hired women, who in a sense cleared the way for her and others. But they didn’t stay. As a makeup editor, Hertzell saw the end of the lead-type era in the composing room and the start of the digital age: printers pasting up stories created by electronic typesetters and making corrections with razor blades. And of course hard times came knocking at the door. The paper’s evening edition closed; editors and reporters were let go and those who stayed had more to do. Ultimately, the paper got caught in the collapse of chains and ended up as the property of a group based in Fargo. But it survived. So did Laurie Hertzell. She left the paper in 1994 and, despite her vow to remain loyal to her native Duluth, moved to the Twin Cities, where she has done quite well, thank you. **CJR**

JAMES BOYLAN is the founding editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review* and professor emeritus of journalism and history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

## Coked Up

*The drug running life, laced with braggadocio*

BY CLANCY MARTIN

THE SECOND TIME I SMUGGLED COCAINE I was fifteen years old. I purchased a large orange wax candle, the coffee-can shaped, six-wick kind with a gold crepe bow around it, at the candle store in the Six Flags mall in Arlington, Texas. I also bought a smaller candle that matched the color. Then I used a paring knife to carve out the inside of the candle and inserted the ounce of cocaine I had purchased from a blind man named Frankie on a farm on the outskirts of Fort Worth. I paid \$1,000 for the ounce, which I planned to cut into two ounces with a laxative powder Frankie told me you could buy at any drug store. There are about twenty-eight grams in an ounce and I would be selling the cocaine for \$100 a gram—the going price in Calgary, Alberta, at the time, if you could get your hands on the stuff—so from my \$1,000 investment, plus my \$400 plane ticket, I would net about \$4,200 on the deal, an excellent return if you aren't thinking about the risks. After my tightly plastic-wrapped cocaine was secured in the candle, I added more plastic to protect it, and then covered the hole with drippings from the smaller candle and the melted candle shavings. Unfortunately, when you melt candle wax it re-cools a different shade. But I had the large round price sticker on the bottom, and though it did not cover the discoloration it helped distract the eye. When the Canadian customs officer removed the candle from my bag—I am surprised I didn't pass out cold; the fearlessness of the teenager, I suppose—I explained that it was a birthday gift for my big sister. He raised one eyebrow as though questioning my taste in gifts, and put it back in the bag.

It turns out that the cleverest techniques of the world's largest cocaine smugglers are no more sophisticated, in kind, than a teenage boy's. In Luca Rastello's *I Am The Market: How to Smuggle Cocaine by the Ton, in Five Easy Lessons*, here's the big secret:

Take eight [granite or marble] tiles and cut a square hole in the middle of each one. Next, make a pile of ten tiles like this: pile the eight tiles with holes in the middle on top of each other, and put an uncut tile at the top and bottom of each pile. Since each tile is 1 centimeter thick, there is a cavity measuring 20 centimeters by 20 centimeters by 8 centimeters, just the right size for your bag of cocaine. The ten tiles

form one packet, which you're going to put into a crate. After you've cut the eight tiles, you put a bag of cocaine into the cavity, glue the pile of ten tiles together (that's important), wrap them up, and put the packet in the middle of the crate, surrounded by packets of uncut tiles. You check that the hot crates weigh exactly the same as the clean crates. And with this trick you get eighty kilos of stuff into one container. Twenty-five containers, and you have your two tons.

The logistical details are somewhat more complex: the smuggler must use the most reputable shipper available, because those loads are least likely to be inspected; one has to prepare for the "electric arches," found since the nineties in every big shipping port or freight airport, that scan incoming shipments (cocaine appears on their computer screens in a vivid yellow); customs and shipping officials at both departure and arrival are usually bribed; land transportation at the arrival port can be tricky (after all, this is cargo by the ton, with lots of extra cargo disguising the contraband). This is why the expert *sistemista*, an Italian slang term for large-scale cocaine smuggler, will arrange only two or three shipments per year. The *sistemista*'s "all the eggs in one basket" theory of risk management might sound odd, but for the cocaine smuggler the real risk is less that a shipment might be seized than that someone might talk. Every shipment, even smaller continental shipments (typically from South America to the United States), involves lots of people—the cocaine must be bought, packaged, transported, repackaged, transported across the border, received, unpackaged, and at last (what a sigh of relief!) received by the wholesaler at the other end—and every extra set of hands is someone who might roll over on the smuggler to save his own ass, or give a cop a tip for a few thousand bucks. The police seize shipments when they get lucky, or when *sistemistas*, ready to make a large shipment, send a decoy shipment to put them off the trail. They catch smugglers when somebody tips them off.

*I Am The Market* is told in the first person by an unnamed, very successful retired cocaine smuggler who has a gift for storytelling and detail—and, like



most good storytellers, a penchant for exaggeration. (Luca Rastello is the Italian reporter who took the story from the unnamed source.) He boasts that every dollar invested in cocaine will return a thousand dollars, though if you follow his math it is more along the lines of ten or fifteen dollars for each dollar invested. (Perhaps he meant to say a 1,000 percent return, which is accurate.) He claims that he can sell tons of cocaine to a wholesaler at an average of \$20,000 a kilo, when in fact if you go to any reputable urban cocaine dealer today, you can buy a kilo of very fine cocaine for about \$20,000. He is fond of self-aggrandizing, ludicrous generalizations like "We're the ones who keep the luxury sector going: 80 percent of the money that lands in the pockets of Versace or Dolce and Gabbana originates with us in one way or another." In fact, plenty of businesses are far more profitable than cocaine smuggling: the estimated total illicit drug trade in 2005 was \$321.6 billion, about 1 percent of the world GDP in the same year. Yes, that's a great deal of money. But even the most enthusiastic cocaine partisan would admit that cocaine couldn't capture more than 10 percent of that total business, or \$32 billion: a significant sum, certainly, but hardly the foundation of Western luxury.

The story begins in the mid-1980s and ends around 2000 or so, as best one can tell: dates are mostly omitted, perhaps to give a slightly dated narrative a more contemporary feel. Our narrator, without giving too much away, is speaking from the confines of his prison cell—or, at least, from his former prison cell. The best parts of his story are not about the mechanics of smuggling cocaine as he practiced it, but the various characters he encountered in the trade. Here's how our narrator introduces Don Pablo Escobar, whom he calls "the greatest drug smuggler of all time": "He was no pussy, it's true. But he was a jovial, lively, brilliant guy, and sincerely concerned about his people.... He had that rather molelike, amiable face, the black eyes behind which you sensed an intelligence constantly at work." If you've never known any drug smugglers, you may be surprised to learn that most of the successful ones resemble other successful businessmen you meet: charm-

ing, affable, kind, dependent on relationships of trust, preferring long-term profits to immediate rewards. Like our narrator, most successful drug smugglers—indeed, most successful drug

improved scanning technology, and post-9/11 security concerns. "Clancy, terrorism is the worst thing that ever happened to the drug business," an acquaintance who is a current cocaine

## When the Canadian customs officer removed the cocaine-stuffed candle from my bag, I am surprised I didn't pass out cold.

dealers—do not themselves use the drugs they sell or transport. "Don't get high on your own supply" was one of the mantras of Tony Montana's first mentor in the movie *Scarface*. But in the real world, the best people in the drug business don't get high on *anyone's* supply.

What really made Escobar great, though, was his role as the first true entrepreneur of the cocaine smuggling trade. From the book-storage industry, he adopted techniques for stashing great sums of cash for long periods of time (a real problem in the drug world, where all serious transactions, no matter how large, are done in cash). He was the first to pack money into tiny, vacuum-sealed packages: in a vacuum pack, we are told, you can get nearly half a million dollars into your pocket. (I have to take the narrator at his word on this one, I am sorry to say.) Escobar was the first smuggler to tunnel under the US-Mexico border, from a building materials business in Ciudad Juárez to another building supply store in El Paso. Before the DEA and the FBI closed the store (someone talked), Escobar moved hundreds or thousands of tons of cocaine into Texas with this simple plan from *The Great Escape*.

Perhaps the narrator's most interesting insight is that the old method of smuggling cocaine, which depended on straightforward bribery and a widespread culture of corruption, no longer works. As recently as three decades ago, he claims, ports in the Netherlands were open to anyone with enough cash; now, European and American ports alike are almost closed to illicit activity, because of increasing professionalization,

smuggler told me. (In South America, however, the smuggler can still accomplish most of his goals with the liberal application of cash, booze, drugs, and prostitutes.) Although his overall system of smuggling still requires bribes at key transfer points, even those bribes must be made in such a way that the individual being bribed can tell himself that he is not really on the take. In this way the cocaine business seems to be following the trajectory of the global economy, where bribery and corruption are still common, but enforcement seems to be modestly improving among most nations (especially, to be fair, in the United States) and internationally the practice seems to be on the decline.

But the fun of the book is not what it teaches us about business ethics, international trade, or even cocaine. If you are a scholar working on the real world economics and social-political dynamics of the international drug trade, this book is not required reading. But if you want a good story told by an unreliable narrator full of fascinating characters, missteps and lucky getaways, priests who smuggle to support their church and hookers with hearts of gold, gamblers and gamblers, cons and con artists, and a realistic portrait of how unglamorous, difficult, and most likely short the life of the drug smuggler actually is, then you'll have a splendid time reading this book. Feel free to take it on the plane. **CJR**

CLANCY MARTIN is professor and chair of philosophy at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, and a contributing editor at Harper's Magazine. His recent novel, *How to Sell*, has much more to say about cocaine.

## Mitford's Good Fight

*Investigation, equal parts guile and wit*

BY ABIGAIL DEUTSCH

THE MERRY MUCKRAKER JESSICA MITFORD, who died in 1996, was among the sharpest British imports since Cheddar cheese. Sixteen years after publishing her lively 1963 exposé of the American funeral industry, *The American Way of Death*, Mitford compiled *Poison Penmanship*, a collection of investigative pieces devoted to probing swindles of all sorts, from overpriced weight-loss programs to slick tourist traps. Now reissued by New York Review Books Classics—that great raiser of the literary dead—the collection resounds as a love song to facts and fairness. And yet it isn't a bit boring.

Nor was Mitford herself. One of six sisters collectively notorious for their talents, looks, and radical politics, she moved to America in her twenties, pursued a variety of leftist causes, and turned to writing at forty-three. Her surface gentleness (“it is not in my sweet nature to lose my temper,” she writes) concealed the systematic intelligence, strong will, and wicked wit that defined her journalism.

*Poison Penmanship's* introduction provides an overview of Mitford's methods. The writer describes researching her subjects through background reading and consultations with experts (one of whom is, intriguingly, a “thirteen-year-old junior high math whiz”). Before interviews, she composes questions and orders them along a spectrum of benevolence ranging from Kind to Cruel. She then butters up interviewees with Kinds before ambushing them with Cruels. Like a torturer, Mitford regularly prompts people to break down into self-incriminating babble. In her takedown of the Famous Writers School correspondence program, which promised students access to renowned authors, she interviews two of the teachers, publisher Bennett Cerf and poet Phyllis McGinley. Here's how they describe their roles in a program that advertises their attention to lessons and aptitude tests:

“If anyone thinks we've got time to look at the aptitude tests that come in, they're out of their mind!” said Bennett Cerf. And Phyllis McGinley: “I'm only a figurehead. I thought a person had to be qualified to take the course, but since I never see any of the applications or the lessons, I don't know.”

Mitford brings out the least savory qualities not only in the people she interviews, but also in the magazines she writes for. She addends an explanatory

**Poison Penmanship:  
The Gentle Art of Muckraking**  
By Jessica Mitford  
New York Review Books Classics  
274 pages, \$15.95

note to each piece in *Poison Penmanship*, and observes of the Famous Writers School article: “My efforts to get it published, a series of dizzying ups and downs, gave me an insight into the policymaking process of magazines that I should never otherwise have acquired.” Several major magazines—*The Atlantic Monthly*, *McCall's*, *Life*—expressed interest, and then tossed the story away like a potato hot enough to burn their relationships with the Famous Writers involved, and, perhaps more significantly, with their advertisers. (Ultimately, *The Atlantic* terminated the school's advertising contract and accepted the piece. The issue featuring the article sold more newsstand copies than any in the periodical's history until that point. The Famous Writers School witnessed a corresponding drop in sales.)

Another riotous backstory provides further insight into the magazine business. In an early piece for *Life*, Mitford explains how her family and friends have refined an elaborate system of collect calling, geared toward conveying messages without paying phone companies a cent: “If the operator announces, ‘Person-to-person call, collect, for Minnie S. Oder,’ it is clear to the husband who answers that his wife has arrived in Minnesota.... Wishing to know whether any important letters have arrived, the wife may ask for Esther Annie Mehl?” (In Mitford's complex moral system, cheating the phone company of a few dollars was okay—she did it to disseminate information, after all, the same reason she wrote articles—whereas cheating individual citizens of thousands of dollars, in the style of the Famous Writers School, was not. Perhaps her Communist leanings explain this attitude.) The telephone company that advertised in *Life* was, however, less than amused. “A friend who worked at *Life* told me all about it,” Mitford writes, quoting this informant:

“The telephone company... called all the brass at *Life* on the carpet and ordered them to show cause why the phone company should pour millions of dollars into advertising in *Life* only to be knifed in the back like this.” What happened? I asked. “Well, first we fired Murphy.” Murphy, my friend explained, is a fictitious *Life* editor who is always fired whenever

some high up in politics or business complains of being maligned in an article. To further assuage the phone company's injured feelings, my friend continued, *Life* arranged to produce a special eight-page color spread on the company's contribution to the space program.

Mitford scrutinizes other forms of media, too, often focusing on how they handle (or in some cases, staunch) the flow of information. Interviewing the literary radical George Jackson, she presses him on how he managed to publish a book in prison, despite abundant censorship. (The book, *Soledad Brother*, comprised letters that Jackson mailed from jail. The guards altered or confiscated many, but eventually Jackson's lawyers managed to prohibit such tampering.) One of her finest pieces examines NBC's decision to block production of a television special meant to clarify details about a particular sexually transmitted disease. Before doing so, the network ordered a series of cuts and substitutions that range from amusing to problematic:

"As is your custom, please exercise caution when showing the interns staring appreciatively at the group of nurses passing by. In addition, please eliminate Dr. Tyler's speech, 'If she is not anybody's kin—and nobody's sister—I would like to scrub with her.'" . . . "Please delete 'a case of syphilis' and substitute 'this disease.'"

Mitford provocatively titles her article "Don't Call It Syphilis," both echoing and rebutting NBC's efforts to hide unpleasant facts.

Tracking truths is Mitford's passion, and her notes reveal her despair when she misses an especially good one. After she published her piece on the Famous Writers School, for example, she found out the teachers had been sending pupils cleverly camouflaged form letters. Having overlooked this tidbit gave her nightmares for years. And yet, for someone so devoted to facts, she is surprisingly enthusiastic about strategic mendacity: "Ethics is not one of my strong points," she explains. She continues:

In general, I think that if you have promised anonymity to the person you are interviewing, or if it is agreed

in advance that he is speaking "off the record," such agreement should be respected. Better, however, to steer him away from such untoward thoughts, which can often be done by fast and dexterous talk about the matter at hand, so that the problem does not arise.

Should modern readers feel uneasy about Mitford's occasionally underhanded methods? To be honest—as she sometimes wasn't—it's hard to remain indignant in the face of her reportage, which illustrates the utility of the artful lie in unearthing more pernicious ones. Besides, her trickery is so entertaining that we inevitably chuckle even as we cluck. At one point, Mitford was researching the corruption of American prisons in preparation for her book on the subject, and sought access to back issues of *The Grapevine*, an insider trade magazine. She knew the publication was hostile to her journalism ("Her kind of reporter is one of the realities of life in these troubled times," an article had lamented). And so she had her assistant write the editors a fawning letter under the guise of an aspiring corrections officer:

I have long felt that my education here has been jammed into a liberal mold of propaganda. I see your publication as a credible news source of our profession undistorted by the rampant irresponsible and unrealistic biases of the media and campus liberals.

Mitford tweaked the fake name her assistant had chosen to Kenneth from Karl—the original, she worried, might sound subversive—and dispatched the note. The magazine not only provided Mitford with back issues but also reprinted the letter for the benefit of all its readers, eager to publicize its popularity among the next generation of corrections hopefuls.

All this strikes Mitford as a hoot. In *Poison Penmanship*, she never comes off as morally superior. Rather, she's both discriminating and flawed, a good and bad cop united into a gleeful one-woman force. She doesn't write so much as crow—whether about other people's schemes or her own—and she leavens her sentences with stylistic surprise. Her passion for justice compares with her

passion for *mots justes*, and, like some of us, she loves a good pun. Mitfordian misfires such as "I ain't gonna study Waugh no more" will likely make such people cackle and slap their knees.

Mitfordian misfires—the messy phrase, the ill-chosen word—are rare but bothersome, like mosquitoes that have managed to penetrate high-quality netting. I wondered why her technical flaws made me flinch, and realized that

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**'Ethics is not one of my strong points,' Jessica Mitford explains.**

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her fault-finding energy, along with her uppity tone, is contagious. After hitting upon the phrase "As my firstborn, I still feel some maternal affection for it," I penned indignantly in the margin: "Now, Jessica! Unhinge that dangling modifier and reattach it somewhere more appropriate!"

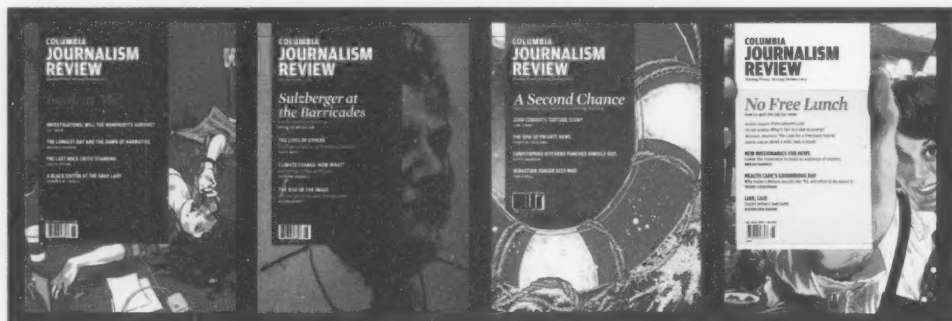
As the author of *The American Way of Death*, Mitford would doubtless want to know how well her pieces have aged since initial publication. While there's life in the old girls yet, they've nonetheless gone a little gray at the temples. As comedy, as exhumations of scandal, and as records of an American scene now passed or passing, they remain exemplary. But most of these pieces stop short of philosophy, failing to address the more profound hows and whys. (She writes, with only some irony, "I am not an essayist by nature; the word evokes high-level scholarship and rich, thoughtful prose on some abstract subject.") A muckraker she was, but particularly fascinated by surfaces: who said what to whom, and how he looked while saying it. She leaves any deeper digging to us. **CJR**

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ABIGAIL DEUTSCH is a writer living in New York. Her work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Village Voice*, *Poetry*, *n+1*, and other publications.

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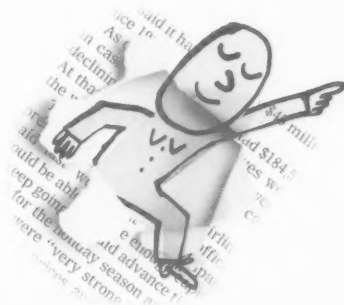
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## The Public Screen

BY MICHAEL SCHUDSON AND JULIA SONNEVEND



THE TELEVISION SET HAD ARRIVED IN the majority of American households by 1955. Inspired by the popular ideals of domesticity, “togetherness,” and a new culture of immense consumer spending, middle-class families rearranged their living rooms, dining rooms, kitchens, dens, and converted garages around the new medium. Like the piano and the fireplace before, television became the center of family gatherings, “the cultural symbol par excellence of family life” (*Make Room for TV* by Lynn Spigel, 1992).

But many forget that television began its career in the mid-forties, not in private homes but in public spaces such as taverns and department stores. Television started to dominate our homes after living a short public life. (Recall the scene when Forrest Gump and his mother watch Elvis Presley through the window of a furniture and appliance store.) And now, when thousands watch media events like the inauguration of Barack Obama and, soon, the royal wedding of Prince William on large public screens, it seems that television has returned to public spaces.

In “Rethinking Media Events: Large Screens, Public Space Broadcasting and Beyond” (*New Media & Society*, June 2010), Scott McQuire from the University of Melbourne, Australia, looks at new forms of collective viewing in urban spaces with a special focus on screens in city squares. His primary example is the BBC Big Screens project, a collaborative endeavor of the BBC, The London 2012 Organising Committee of the Olympic Games, and local councils to install screens with sound systems at central locations in eighteen cities in the United Kingdom. The first screen was installed in Manchester in 2003. The screens mostly display BBC content, but also web videos, site-specific or local programming, and interactive virtual games. The BBC entered into partnerships with local councils and art organizations to diversify content and, in McQuire’s words, “recast itself as a more ‘open’ institution in order to negotiate the more fluid institutional context of contemporary society.” In choosing what to show, the organizers tried to balance what they call the “event mode,” when the audience pays close attention to the event, and the “ambient mode,” when viewers are “transient and distracted.” While the event mode seemed obvious (next year the screens will display the Olympic and Paralympic games), the ambient mode needed a lot of experiments (can soap op-

eras convince passersby to stay or would noncommercial local films do better?).

The project has delivered some surprises: people started to use the screens for unexpected collective rituals. Many gathered in front of the screens for the three-minute silence to commemorate the London bombings a week after they happened. And when a soldier from Liverpool was murdered in a particularly shocking way in Iraq, more people gathered in front of the Liverpool screen than around the cathedral where the memorial service was held. Some even placed flowers at the bottom of the screen.

McQuire raises challenging questions about big screens. Who will fund these screens in the long run? How can the displayed content be adequately regulated? And how to inspire more interaction between screens and viewers in contrast to passive consumption? In McQuire’s view, public screens not only display events but can help build community and should be used to foster play, sharing, and collaboration. Connected in international networks, these screens can even contribute to the formation of a “transnational public sphere.”

While McQuire’s research focuses on a few exceptional screens, there are many other screens in our everyday lives: on our ATMs and computers, at our grocery stores and gas stations. Recognizing the ubiquity of screens, the Leverhulme Media Research Centre at Goldsmiths, University of London, started to research them in the politically diverse but similarly screen-dense cities of Cairo, London, and Shanghai. Chris Berry and his colleagues took photographs and notes of screens in retail and recreational sites, public institutions, and transport hubs to show how people interact with hundreds of screens of all sizes and shapes in everyday settings (see [www.gold.ac.uk/media-research-centre/project5](http://www.gold.ac.uk/media-research-centre/project5)).

Both large public screens and these “regular” screens have become part of our daily practices and rituals. Research like McQuire’s and Goldsmiths’s help us understand the ways screens can both separate and unite us. **CJR**

MICHAEL SCHUDSON teaches at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism. JULIA SONNEVEND is a Ph.D. student in Communications at Columbia.

# The Lower Case

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**Church member  
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The Advocate (Baton Rouge, LA) 11/27/10

**Salisbury PTA hosts  
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Daily News (Newburyport, MA) 2/3/11

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The News Virginian (Waynesboro, VA) 11/30/09

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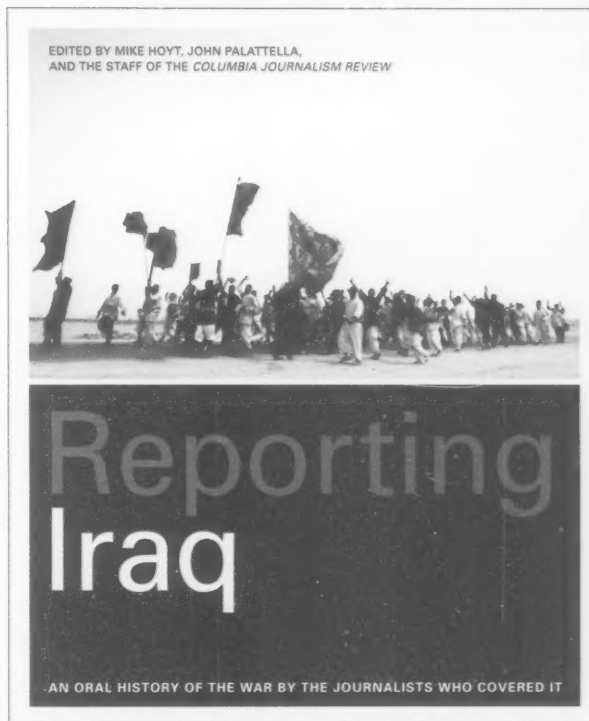
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